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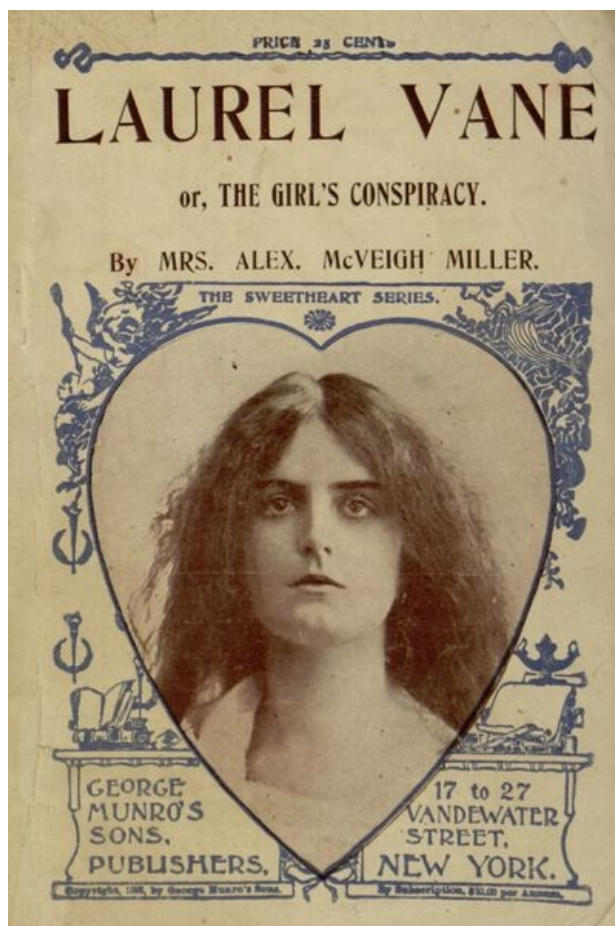
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**LAUREL VANE**

or, THE GIRL'S CONSPIRACY.

By MRS. ALEX. McVEIGH MILLER.

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THE SWEETHEART SERIES.

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MUNRO'S

17 to 27  
VANDEWATER  
STREET,

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## **Laurel Vane;**

or,

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**By MRS. ALEX McVEIGH MILLER.**

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## LAUREL VANE.

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### CHAPTER I.

All the clocks of the great, thronged city clanged out the hour of midnight from their hoarse, brazen throats simultaneously, and as the last tremulous echo died away on the air, a human soul that had wasted its glorious talents, and squandered its heritage of genius in a reckless, dissipated life, was launched out on the great, shoreless tide of eternity.

And in the same moment of time a young, fair, innocent girl, the dead man's only child, was cast adrift, friendless and forlorn, upon the mercies of the cold, hard world.

She fell, like one dead, by the bedside, and the wealth of her burnished golden hair fell like a pitying veil over the slender form that had bent like a flower before the relentless blast of fate.

The coarse, but not unkindly, lodging house people bore her into her own little room, and left her there alone to recover, while they prepared the dead man for burial to-morrow.

It was but a little while that this blessed unconsciousness lasted, when Laurel Vane struggled up to her feet to push back with little, trembling hands the cloud of golden hair from her white brow, and stare with great, frightened, somber eyes out into the strange, unknown future.

What terrible temptation, what love and sorrow and bitter despair that future held in its keeping for her was yet mercifully hidden from her sight by the thick curtain of mystery that ever hides To-morrow from our curious eyes.

The daughter of a genius, who had beclouded his gifted brain with the fumes of strong drink, and who had only written his brilliant articles under the stress of compulsion, and to keep the wolf from the door, the girl realized that she was left alone and penniless, with not a friend to pity or protect her. It came over her suddenly, and with a great thrill of horror, that her father's last article—finished only yesterday, before that sudden illness laid its chilly, fatal hand upon him—must be carried to the publishing house and the money received therefor before she could bury her dead!

Her dead! She could scarcely realize that her fond, though erring father, the profound scholar, the erratic genius who had loved his little girl even while he had unpardonably neglected her, was gone from her for evermore. With trembling footsteps she glided to the room where the people, having robed him for the grave, had left him alone in the solemn majesty of death.

A terrible shudder shook her frame as she beheld that sheeted *something* lying in stiff, rigid outline upon the narrow bed. Half frightened, she drew back the snowy linen and gazed upon the handsome, marble-white features, to whose pallid grace death had added a solemn dignity all its own.

Great bursting sobs of regret and sorrow shook the daughter's frame as she gazed on that loved face, where in life the stamp of genius had been marred by the traces of dissipation and vulgar pleasures. Laurel was little more than a child, yet she knew that her father had recklessly wasted his God-given talents and sated his soul on the dry husks of life. Yet in all her sorrow and pity, in

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all her fear of the untried future, no thought of anger or blame came to her as she kept her sorrowful vigil by his side. There were others who blamed him that he had left this tender flower, his "Laurel blossom," as he poetically called her, alone and penniless in the hard, cold world. But she, his daughter, had nothing but tears and love for him now when he lay before her dead.

In a few hours they would carry him away, her beloved, forever out of her sight, but even those last few hours she could not have to spend with him. She was too forlorn and poor to give herself these last moments with him. She must carry his last manuscript to the office and receive the money before she could pay for his coffin and hearse. And already the lodging-house keepers were adjuring her to hasten in burying him. It was so gloomy having a corpse in the house, they said, unfeelingly.

So, at the earliest office hours, Laurel presented herself at the editor's desk with the small roll of manuscript clasped tightly in her little black gloved hand.

The clerk stared almost rudely at the young face from which she put aside the shielding veil with one timid hand.

"A little beauty, if only she weren't so pale and tear-stained," was his mental comment.

"I have brought Mr. Vane's article for the magazine. Can I have the money for it now?" she asked, falteringly.

"Very sorry, but the editor isn't in. You may leave the paper, and Mr. Vane can call for his money later in the day," replied the clerk, devouring her sweet face with his bold, admiring eyes.

The red mouth trembled, the wide, somber dark eyes brimmed over with quick tears.

"He—he cannot come—he is dead!" she answered in uneven tones, "and," flushing crimson in a sensitive shame at her own poverty, "I must have the money to bury him!"

"Ah, dead? Very sorry, I'm sure," said the clerk, a little startled out of his coolness; "and you are his daughter?"

"Yes, I am Laurel Vane."

"The editor doesn't come down to his office till noon. He always examines articles and pays for them himself. Very sorry your father is dead—a fine writer when he chose to take up the pen. Can I do anything else for you, Miss Vane?" went on the bold-eyed young man, rather pitying her sorrow and timidity, inasmuch as she was fair to look upon.

"If you will give me the address I will go to Mr. Gordon's private residence. I must have the money without delay," she answered, faintly.

He scribbled the address on a card for her, and after bowing her out in his most killing air, he went back to tell the printers that "old Vane had drunk himself to death at last, and left a devilish pretty little daughter without a penny."

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"With a name as pretty as her face—Laurel Vane!" he added.

"He might have had a prouder laurel for his brow than a penniless daughter if he had not been so fond of his glass," said the printers, grimly.

And this was Louis Vane's epitaph.

While Laurel directed her faltering steps to the editor's up-town residence, all unconscious that the finger of Fate was pointing the way.

Mr. Gordon was one of the most successful editors and publishers of the day, and his brown-stone house on one of the fashionable avenues of the great city looked like a palace to Laurel's unaccustomed eyes. She went slowly up the broad steps and rang the bell a little nervously, feeling her courage desert her at thought of the interview with the stern editor. No thought came to her that her first meeting with that august personage would be in a darker, more fateful hour than this.

The smart serving-man who opened the door stared at our simply clad heroine a little superciliously. He could not recognize a lady apart from a fine dress.

"I wish to see Mr. Gordon, please," Laurel said, with quiet dignity.

"Mr. Gordon is out, mem," was the disappointing reply.

"Where is he gone? When will he come back?" exclaimed Laurel, in piteous disappointment.

"He's gone into the country, and he won't be back until to-night," was the concise reply.

The day was warm, but the girl shivered as if the ground had been swept from beneath her feet by the icy blast of winter. An unconscious cry broke from her quivering lips, and she clasped her little hands tightly together.

"Oh, what shall I do now?" she moaned, despairingly.

"I'm sure I don't know, mem," said the man impudently, and making an impatient move to shut the door in her face.

He might have done so with impunity, for Laurel, gazing before her with dazed, despairing gaze, was for the moment incapable of speech or action, but at that moment a door opened sharply on the side of the hall, a swish of silk sounded softly, and a clear, sweet voice inquired:

"Who is that asking for papa, Charles?"

Charles opened the door and fell back obsequiously. A lovely blue-eyed girl, richly dressed, came toward Laurel.

"I am Mr. Gordon's daughter. Is your business important?" she inquired with girlish curiosity.

She thought she had never seen anything so sweet and sad as the dark, wistful eyes Laurel flashed upward to meet her gaze.

"Oh, yes, yes, it is very important," she faltered, incoherently. "Perhaps you could—that is, if you would—"

Miss Gordon smiled a little at the tripping speech, but not unkindly.

"Come in. I will do what I can," she said, and led Laurel past the discomfited Charles into a lovely little anteroom, with flowers and books and pictures, that made it a little feminine paradise. [Pg 6]

She pushed a little cushioned blue-satin chair toward Laurel.

"Sit down and tell me what you want of papa," she said, gently; and Laurel's impulsive heart went out in a great flood of gratitude to this beautiful stranger who looked and spoke so sweetly.

She grasped the back of the chair tightly with both hands, and turned her dark, beseeching eyes on Miss Gordon's face.

"I have brought Mr. Vane's manuscript for the magazine," she added. "He—my papa—is dead," she added, with a rush of bitter tears, "and we are so poor I must have the money to pay for his funeral."

Instantly Beatrix Gordon drew out her dainty pearl *port-monnaie*. "You poor child!" she said, compassionately. "What is the price of the article?"

Laurel named it, and Miss Gordon counted the money out into the little trembling hand, and received the manuscript.

"I am very sorry Mr. Vane is dead," she said. "He was a very gifted writer. Has he left you all alone, my poor girl?" with gentle compassion.

"All alone," Laurel echoed, drearily.

Then suddenly she caught Miss Gordon's hand, and covered it with tears and kisses.

"You have been so kind and so noble to me, that I will do anything on earth for you, Miss Gordon," she sobbed out, gratefully.

Then she hurried away to bury her dead, little thinking in what way Beatrix Gordon would claim her promise.

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## CHAPTER II.

"Come in," said Laurel, faintly, in answer to the sharp rap at the door.

The cheap, plain funeral was over, and the orphan sat alone in the deepening twilight in the shabby little room, now invested with a somber dignity all its own since the presence of death had so lately been there.

Laurel's head was bowed upon her hands, and tears coursed slowly, each one a scalding drop of woe, down her white cheeks.

The door opened, and the woman from whom Mr. Vane had rented the two shabby little rooms entered abruptly. She was a coarse, hard-featured creature, devoid of sympathy or sensibility. She looked coldly at the weeping girl.

"The rent's due to-day, Miss Vane," she said, roughly. "Have you got the money to pay it?"

Laurel silently counted over the contents of her slim purse.

"Here is the money, Mrs. Groves, and it is the last cent I have on earth," she said, drearily, as she placed the silver in the woman's greedy outstretched hand.

"Is that so? Then of course you'll not be wanting the rooms any longer. I will trouble you to move out early in the morning, so's I may rent them to somebody else," exclaimed Mrs. Groves.

Laurel sprung to her feet in dismay, a terrified look on her fair young face. [Pg 7]

"Oh, madam, I have nowhere to go—so soon!" she cried out pleadingly. "Perhaps you will let me keep the one little room until I can find work. I will be sure to pay you!"

"I can't depend on no such uncertain prospects," declared Mrs. Groves, unfeelingly. "I've got to be pretty certain where my money's coming from before I rent my rooms. So out you go in the morning, and if you don't leave quietly I'll have your trunk hoisted out on the sidewalk in a jiffy, so there!"

With this emphatic threat the rude landlady banged herself out of the room, and Laurel sunk down with a low moan of terror upon the floor.

She was no coward, reader, this forlorn little heroine of ours, but she knew scarcely more of the wide world outside her cheap lodging-house than a baby. She had lived in one poor place or

another with her erratic father all her life, keeping their poor little rooms with untaught skill, meagerly supported by his neglected talent, and with not an idea of how to earn her own living. Mr. Vane had educated her after his own desultory fashion, but not in a practical way that she could utilize now in her need. She wondered with a shudder of dread what she should do, and where she should go to-morrow when she was turned out into the streets, of which she felt horribly afraid, and which her father had seldom permitted her to traverse alone.

She pushed open the casement and looked out. Night had fallen, and under the glare of the gaslight Laurel saw wicked men and ribald women tramping the streets. To-morrow night she would be out on the horrible pavements among them, with nowhere to go, and not a friend in all the wide, wicked city. Perhaps they would murder her, these wolves of the street, when she was cast out like a helpless white lamb astray from the fold.

Shivering, she recalled some verses she had somewhere read. They seemed to fit her own forlorn strait.

"Where the lamps quiver  
So far in the river,  
With many a light  
From window and casement,  
From garret to basement,  
She stood with amazement,  
Houseless by night."

"Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned, tremblingly. "It were a thousand times better, papa, if I had died with you."

The room door opened suddenly and without warning, and Mrs. Groves reappeared.

"Here's a young man asking for you, Miss Vane. P'r'aps he'll tell you how to make a honest living now your pa's dead," she said, with a coarse, significant chuckle.

She hustled the visitor across the threshold, and, closing the door, stumped loudly down the passage, but returned in a moment on tip-toe, to play the eavesdropper.

The room was all in darkness save for the gaslight that streamed through the open window. Laurel turned quickly to light her little lamp, wondering who her visitor might be. [Pg 8]

To her amazement she saw the rather good-looking and bold-eyed clerk she had met at the publishing-house that morning.

"Good evening, Miss Vane," he said, insinuatingly. "I ventured to call, thinking that you might need a friend."

The quick instinct of purity took alarm in Laurel's breast. She drew back coldly as he offered her his smooth, white hand.

"I needed a friend this morning, but you did not seem to remember it then," she said, scathingly.

"I—ah—oh, I was taken by surprise, then. I had not my wits about me," he stammered, disconcerted. "Pray pardon my forgetfulness. I have been thinking about you all day, and wishing I could help you. Here is my card. Pray command my services."

Laurel took the bit of gilt-edged pasteboard, and read the name written on it in smooth copper-plate. It was

"ROSS POWELL."

The young man had seated himself, meanwhile, with the coolest self-possession. Laurel looked at him with her great, wistful, dark eyes.

"Do you really mean what you say?" she inquired, a faint ring of hope in her dejected voice.

"Yes. I infer that your father has left you without means of support, and I wish to offer you a good situation," Mr. Powell replied, suavely, with a sparkle in his bold gray eyes.

The girl clasped her little hands impulsively together. Hope and fear struggled together on her fair young face.

"But I don't know how to do anything," she cried, ingenuously. "I have never been to school like other girls. I've always kept papa's rooms and mended his clothes, and made my own dresses, but I couldn't do anything like that well enough for any one else."

Ross Powell's gray eyes sparkled wickedly. He kept the lids drooped over them, that Laurel might not see their evil gleam.

"Oh, yes, you could!" he exclaimed. "I know some one who wants a little housekeeper just like you, to keep two beautiful rooms in order as you did for your father. Will you come, Laurel?"

"Who is the person?" she inquired, flushing sensitively at his familiar utterance of her name.

Ross Powell moved his chair to Laurel's side, and gazed deep into her beautiful, wondering dark eyes.

"The person is myself," he replied, in low, lover-like tones. "I have fallen in love with you, my beautiful little Laurel, and I want you to come and be my little fairy housekeeper. I will love and cherish you as the darling of my heart."

Laurel regarded him a moment in blank silence. There was a look of genuine perplexity on her



innocent face.

She spoke at length in a low, doubtful tone.

"Are you asking me to be your wife, sir?" was her *naïve* question.

He flushed and looked rather abashed at the innocent question.

"Why, no, my dear, not exactly," he answered, regaining his self-possession in a moment. "I don't wish to saddle myself with a wife yet; but it would be about the same thing. I would worship you, my beautiful Laurel, and you should have fine dresses and jewels, visit the theaters and operas, live in beautiful rooms; while I, your adoring slave—"

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"Stop, Ross Powell!"

She had stood like one turned to stone, gazing and listening for a moment; but now her young voice rang like a clarion through the room: "Stop, Ross Powell!"

He sprung from his seat, and moving to her side attempted to take her hand. She tore it from him and struck him an ignominious slap in the face with that small white member. Her eyes blazed, her cheeks burned.

She crossed to the door, and threw it open so suddenly that Mrs. Groves was disclosed in the act of listening, but Laurel paid no heed to her as she shuffled away, crestfallen, and for once ashamed of herself.

The flashing eyes of the girl seemed to wither the villain where he stood gazing sullenly upon her, with the red mark of that frantic blow upon his face.

"Go, Ross Powell," she said, pointing a disdainful finger at him. "Go, and may the good God in heaven punish you doubly and trebly for this dastardly outrage on an unprotected girl!"

He slunk across the threshold like the base, evil-hearted coward that he was, but out in the narrow passage he turned and looked back at her with a malevolent glare on his crimson-marked face.

"You have made an enemy, Laurel Vane," he hissed. "I would have given you love and protection, but you have chosen my hatred instead. I shall not forget you. I shall always remember that blow in my face, and I shall have my revenge for it. Look well to your future, my beautiful fury!"

Laurel slammed and locked the door in the face of the angry wretch, and fell upon the floor again, giving vent to her outraged feelings in a storm of passionate tears.

But it seemed as though she were not destined to have any peace or quiet that evening. Again a rap sounded on the door.

She brushed away her falling tears and opened it in fear and trembling.

A smart, pretty girl was her visitor this time.

"I am Miss Gordon's maid," said the newcomer, and she slipped a perfumed little envelope into Laurel's hand.

Laurel opened it and read, with bewildered eyes:

"MY DEAR LITTLE LAUREL,—I wish to see you very much, but there are reasons why I cannot come to you, so I have sent my maid, Clarice, to bring you to me. I have been thinking of you all day, and of your sweet promise to do anything on earth for me. I believe that we can mutually help each other. Come quickly, dear. Have no fear but that Clarice will guide you safely to me.

"Your friend,

"BEATRIX GORDON."

"Will you come, Miss Vane?" asked the pretty maid intelligently.

"Yes," Laurel answered, hopefully, and so went forth to her future.

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## CHAPTER III.

One of the most magnificent of the many palace homes that adorn the glorious Hudson River belonged to St. Leon Le Roy.

It was a beautiful, picturesque structure with graceful towers, projecting oriel windows, charming balconies, and marble steps that led down into spacious grounds so beautifully laid out that one never wearied of the miniature lakes, the sparkling fountains, the splendid shrubbery, the rare flowers, and the costly statuary that dotted the velvety green lawns that sloped down to the water's edge. It was a miniature paradise without, and the interior of the dwelling was no less beautiful and tasteful. Cultured taste and rare refinement had united with great wealth to make it a complete and perfect ideal of a home. Perhaps the first St. Leon Le Roy, when he had built this beautiful home and carried his blooming bride there, had not been far wrong when he called it "Eden."

Whether he had found it a veritable Eden mattered little to him now. He had passed to his rest in

"the land that is fairer than day," and his son reigned in his stead, a king by right of his imperious will, and worshipped blindly by the queen-dowager his mother.

He was tall, dark, and stately, with an almost godlike beauty marred somewhat by an expression of cynicism, coldness, and pride, all curiously blended together. He was past the prime of youth, being about five-and-thirty, and his varied experience of men and things had left cold, distrustful lines about his firm, mustached lips, and a mocking light in his proud dark eyes.

An impatient discontent rested on his handsome features as he sat in a beautiful morning-room with his mother the second day after the beginning of this story. The handsome, richly dressed old lady was reading aloud from a letter that had just been received with the morning's mail:

"MY DEAR MRS. LE ROY,—I am in a dilemma, and I turn to you, my old friend, although I have not seen you in many years, believing that you will aid and abet me in my innocent scheme. My daughter, Beatrix, has formed a foolish engagement with a young man of small income and no prospects. She is both beautiful and accomplished, and as the sole heiress of her father's wealth I cannot endure to see her become the prey of a designing fortune-hunter. My plan is to separate them by sending Beatrix away from the city and getting rid of her lover by some clever scheme before she returns. If possible, Mr. Gordon will have him sent to Europe (I would like to send the wretch to Kamtchatka if I could!) on some lucrative mission. Both our hearts are deeply set on this plan. Indeed, delicate invalid as I am, my nerves are so unstrung by this affair, that I feel I shall perish unless I can rescue my child from this undesirable entanglement. And now, dear Mrs. Le Roy, for your share in our little scheme. I know that during the absence of your son in Europe, you are leading a quiet, retired life, at your beautiful home on the Hudson. I wish to have Beatrix visit you for a few months, while we get her obnoxious lover out of the way for good. So sure am I of your consent, that I have pretended to Beatrix that you have already invited her, and on the day after to-morrow I shall send her down to Eden in care of her maid. I would accompany her myself, only that I am a confirmed invalid. My dear friend, you must take the best care of my treasure. See that she sends no letters to any one but her father or me. Allow no stranger to visit her. I depend hopefully on your co-operation in this matter, for my daughter is a fitting mate for the best, and I will not sacrifice her to a poor man. You will pardon my prolix letter, for the sake of a mother's anxiety.

"Yours,

"ISABEL GORDON."

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She closed the letter and looked up at St. Leon, who stood in the embrasure of a lace-draped window gazing carelessly out at the beautiful grounds. A mocking sneer curled his thin lips as he returned to her.

"A scheming woman of the world," he said, sententiously. "I hope you will not lend yourself to her iniquitous plan."

Mrs. Le Roy glanced at her letter again.

"You see she really gives me no chance for refusing, simply taking my consent for granted," she said, dubiously.

"No matter. Write her that you cannot receive Miss Beatrix. Tell her I came home yesterday, and that I am an ogre who would frighten her beauty away. What! is all the peace of my home-coming to be marred by the coming of a romantic love-sick girl?" he exclaimed.

"I will write her not to come, then, St. Leon—but, heavens, look at the date of this letter! It has miscarried! She should be here to-day!" exclaimed the lady nervously.

"Telegraph her, then—anything—only keep the girl away!" exclaimed Le Roy, testily.

"I will do so immediately, St. Leon," exclaimed his mother, all in a flutter that was quite unusual to her high-bred dignity.

But "fate is above us all!" At this moment a trained obsequious servant opened the door, and announced respectfully:

"Miss Gordon."

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## CHAPTER IV.

The agitated lady and her haughty, handsome son both looked at the door with an irrepressible start.

A sixteen year old girl was wavering on the threshold, staring into the elegant room and at the cold, curious faces of the mother and son with parted lips, and large, somber, frightened dark eyes. Over the simple, short traveling dress, of plain, dark-gray material, her rich, burnished golden hair flowed in billows of brightness beneath the wide brim of her simple hat. A neat pretty maid hovered in the background, looking far more cool and self-possessed than her lovely young mistress.

St. Leon Le Roy's quick eyes caught and held for a moment the gaze of those startled ones. He saw a pale, pure face, exquisitely molded, with perfect features, save, as he said to himself, her nose was a trifle too short, and her lips too full. But then the defect of her nose lent character to her face, and the pouting lips showed tenderness. "A baby face," he said to himself, disdainfully, noting the quiver of the lips, that trembled like a child's about to cry.

The girl's dark eyes turned quickly from that haughty, handsome face as if in fear, and sought comfort in the woman's, but it was cold and haughty too. There was no welcome on it save what cold, conventional courtesy required. She advanced and gave the newcomer the tips of her fingers and the side of her cheek to kiss.

"Welcome to Eden, Miss Gordon," she said, chillingly, and then she led her up to her son. "Allow me to present my son, St. Leon. He only returned from Europe yesterday," she added.

They bowed to each other with chill courtesy, these two, and that was all. He was too annoyed at her coming to be ordinarily civil, and she was too frightened at her grave, stern-looking host to put out her little mite of a hand to him.

"You have quite surprised me, Beatrix—I suppose I must call you Beatrix," said Mrs. Le Roy, trying to infuse some warmth into her frigid manner. "You see, your mamma's letter miscarried, and I have but just received it, so you must excuse my not sending the carriage to meet you."

"Certainly," Beatrix murmured, coloring warmly for a moment, and veiling her splendid eyes beneath their long fringed lashes, while a sigh of relief escaped her lips as her hostess continued:

"I dare say you would like to be shown your room now, that you may remove the dust of travel. It is very unpleasant, taking a journey this warm weather."

Beatrix agreed with her, and when she had herself conducted her and the maid Clarice to a lovely suite of rooms, all silver and azure, Mrs. Le Roy returned to her son.

He still stood in the embrasure of the window, pulling his dark mustache rather sulkily with his slender brown fingers.

"Was there ever such a *contretemps!*" she exclaimed, going up to him. "What shall we do, St. Leon?"

"Nothing," he answered, rather shortly.

"Nothing?" she echoed, helplessly, yet with an accent of relief in her voice.

"Why, what is there to do?" he inquired, impatiently. "She is here, whether we want her or not. We are not barbarians; we cannot send our guest away. Besides, I have changed my mind; Mrs. Gordon was right."

"Right!" she echoed, gazing up into his face inquiringly.

"My lady-mamma, has our guest quite upset your equanimity?" he inquired, smiling down at her perturbed face. "You echo my words with parrot-like pertinacity!"

"If I am disturbed, St. Leon, it is on your account," she replied, with dignity. "I could endure the girl's visit very well myself."

"So can I, I think," he returned, musingly. "She is not at all what my fancy painted her—a self-possessed fashionable beauty, who would rather compel me to dance attendance upon her. I could see that the little thing was rather afraid of me; I dare say she will keep out of my way."

"I have no doubt of it. She was positively shy and awkward. Not at all like her mother, whom I remember as a brilliant belle who held her own with queenly dignity," said Mrs. Le Roy. "I cannot blame Isabel for her caution; Beatrix looks too young to have a lover."

"'She's o'er young to marry yet,' certainly," assented her son. "We will keep the ewe-lamb safe, mamma, and woe be to the wolf that comes prowling around the precious fold."

He spoke so dryly that she could not tell whether he was in jest or earnest, and his expression was just as inscrutable as his tone. While she was puzzling over both, Beatrix returned.

Her plain gray traveling-dress had been exchanged for a pretty, soft, white robe with delicate laces about it, and she carried a wide sun hat in her small, dimpled hands.

The big dark eyes did not look quite so frightened now. They looked yearningly out at the beautiful grounds.

"May I go out there?" she asked. "I have never seen such a beautiful spot in my life before!"

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## CHAPTER V.

St. Leon looked at the girl as she made her timid request. Her eyes drooped from his quickly, and the frightened look came into them again.

He was unaccountably vexed, although a moment before he had been pleased, because she was afraid of him.

"Why should the little goose fear me? I am not an ogre," he said to himself, shortly, turning back to the window, while Mrs. Le Roy answered politely:

"Certainly, child, and I will go with you to show you the way."

They went out together, and St. Leon watched them from the window, appearing and disappearing among the winding walks, the girl's white figure bending here and there among the gay *parterres* of flowers, the morning sunshine lighting her waving tresses into splendor. Mrs. Le Roy had given her *carte blanche* as to the flowers, and she was eagerly filling her hands with the scented beauties.

After a little, he remembered that his mother was growing old, and that she must be weary of keeping pace with those light, quick footsteps. He hesitated, and then went out to them.

"*Chère maman*, you must be tired," he said. "Sit down here on this garden-seat and rest, and I will take your place with Miss Gordon."

Beatrix turned with quick compunction.

"Are you tired?" she said, looking at Mrs. Le Roy with the long, curling lashes lifted from her expressive eyes. "I am so sorry. I forgot that it isn't new to you as it is to me. Shall we go in?"

"By no means," answered the lady. "I will sit here and rest, and St. Leon shall be your escort."

She flashed him a little glance, quickly withdrawn.

"Perhaps you wouldn't like," she said.

He laughed, and walked on by her side by way of answer, thinking to himself that she was rather prettier than he had thought at first. The wide sun-hat was tilted carelessly back from the fair low brow with its childish fringe of sunny locks, and the dark eyes with their long curling lashes looked darker still by contrast. A soft color had come into her face, and shy smiles of pleasure hovered around her lips. She looked like a child, with the front of her white overskirt held up in her hands and filled with flowers.

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"Do you like flowers?" he asked her.

"I *love* them," she answered, with a distinct emphasis on the words. "I love them, and I never saw so many and such lovely flowers as you have here."

"Then you ought to enjoy your visit to Eden," he said, pleased at her pleasure in his home, and little thinking how she *would* enjoy that visit—how all the joy and sorrow of her life would date from these summer hours.

"Yes, I should enjoy it—I *know that*—only—only—" she said, and paused in confusion.

"Only what? Tell me," said St. Leon Le Roy, thinking suddenly of the lover from whom the girl had been torn by her scheming parents.

"She is thinking of that fortune hunter—that wretched entanglement," he said to himself, wondering what her next words would be.

"Only," she went on with childish frankness, and giving him one of her swift, dark glances, quickly withdrawn, "I am afraid you are—are *angry* that I have come here!"

Oh, wondrous perceptions of innocence! He flushed a little under his handsome brown skin, and pulled nervously at his silky mustache.

"Why should you think so?" he queried.

"I don't know. I—I seemed to feel it in the air," she said, vaguely, and in a little troubled tone. "You *are* vexed about it—*aren't* you?" and she turned on him fully for the first time the full gaze of those large wondrous black eyes, before whose searching gaze even the most accomplished Ananias might have hesitated to answer falsely.

"I should be discourteous if I answered in the affirmative," he said.

"You needn't mind that—not the least bit in the world," she said, eagerly. "You see, I didn't know when I came that *you* were here. I thought there was only an old lady—your mamma. If you don't want me here, I must go back to— I can go away," she said, growing strangely pale as the words left her lips.

"Perhaps you would have been better pleased if I had not been here," he said, curiously, as they walked on down a wide, graveled path, leading to the river.

"Perhaps so—I don't like men very much," she answered, with innocent frankness.

"Ridiculous affectation, when she is dead in love with a fortune-hunting scoundrel!" thought he, gnawing his mustache vexedly.

Somehow since Beatrix Gordon had come to Eden he chose to take the most contemptible view of her lover.

"Perhaps you would like me to go away?" he said, with fine sarcasm.

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They had come to the pretty rustic fence that bordered the lawn. Below it was the public road, beyond this the wide, beautiful river, with the white sails coming and going on its glassy breast. Beatrix sunk down on a convenient seat with a crimson, dismayed face. Some of the flowers fell from her overskirt in the surprise with which she regarded him.

"Oh, what have I said? I didn't mean *that*—never!" she cried, as he stooped to restore her treasures. "I wouldn't have you go away from your beautiful home for me, Mr. Le Roy."

"Very well, I will stay. I dare say Eden is wide enough for us to keep out of each other's way," he

answered, as he sat down by her side.

"Yes, surely," she cried; "and if—if you will only tell me how, I won't bother you—I won't come in your way at all."

"Very well," grimly. "We will both stay at Eden and compromise that way. We will try not to intrude upon each other. My favorite haunt is the library. If you will keep out of there, you may have the right of way in the rest of the house without materially disturbing me."

Palpable dismay lowered over the lifted face that looked so lovely in the golden sunlight.

"The library? And the books are all there—aren't they?" she asked, with a note of keen yearning in her voice.

"Yes; do you like books?" he asked, curiously.

"I love them," she answered, discarding the word "like" as she had done about the flowers. There was no half way strain in her nature. Fervent, ardent, impetuous, the word was too cold for her.

Those things that pleased her she *loved*.

"Then, perhaps I will lend you some books sometimes, if you will only keep out of my sanctum," he said, coolly. "Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise," she replied, with a gentle, smothered sigh.

Then suddenly she lifted her eyes and asked him the last question he would have expected to hear from a girl nurtured in the lap of wealth and luxury.

"Mr. Le Roy, if you were a girl like I am—and if you hadn't any parents, nor home, nor friends—nor any money—nor any practical education—what would you do to earn an honest living?"

There was a palpable anxiety in voice and face. She had grown very pale, her dark eyes were distinctly wistful.

"She is thinking of that obnoxious lover. She would even dare poverty for his sake," he said to himself in displeasure.

Aloud he answered carelessly:

"It is hard to say what I should do in such a case, Miss Gordon. I believe I should throw myself into that beautiful river yonder and so end all."

In the dark after-days he remembered those words.

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## CHAPTER VI.

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Beatrix Gordon looked at the beautiful river with wide, dark eyes. The summer sunshine gilded the blue waves, the white sails dotted its wide expanse like fairy shallows gliding to and fro. It was grand and dazzlingly beautiful, but the young girl shivered as she thought of the dark depths below. She turned from it to look gravely into St. Leon Le Roy's handsome face with its cold, cynical eyes.

"You would throw yourself into the river and so end all," she repeated. "Oh, Mr. Le Roy, is it so hard for a poor girl to live that suicide is the least choice of evils?"

Her little hands clasped each other tightly over the mass of glowing flowers in her lap, and her red lips trembled with earnestness. He looked at her in something like wonder.

"I do not see why Mr. Gordon's daughter should trouble herself over such a question," he said. "But since you ask me I must answer yes. The world is full of pitfalls for the young and beautiful girl who has her own living to gain. Were I in the situation you describe, I believe I should speedily end the struggle with fate by a leap into the river."

These hastily spoken words, too, he was fated to recall in an hour of which he dreamed not now.

Beatrix did not answer him. She sat very still, looking before her with a strange, far-away expression on her face. A long, deep, unconscious sigh quivered over her lips.

"You are troubled over what I said—why?" he asked, curiously.

And the girl answered, with a shiver:

"I am afraid of life."

St. Leon began to feel vaguely interested in this girl whose coming he had dreaded so much. She was not like other young ladies he had known—not what he had expected the rich Mr. Gordon's daughter to be. There was a spice of originality about her. Why should she, the petted child of wealth and luxury, think about these things of which she had talked? Was it because her lover was poor?

He did not like to think of that lover from whom her parents wished to separate her. She was a child, he said to himself—too young to burn her heart in the flame of love.

"I do not see why you should fear life. It is likely to prove very fair and bright to you, if you do your duty—if you implicitly *obey* the wishes of your parents," he said, watching her keenly.

The lovely face flushed crimson, but she made him no answer. She played with her flowers nervously. She was afraid of St. Leon Le Roy's keen, merciless eyes.

"You do not wish me to lecture you upon your duty?" he said, after waiting in vain for her to reply.

"No, I do not think I do," she replied, frankly.

"Then I beg your pardon. Indeed, I am not worthy of lecturing any one upon that cold, hard word, duty," he said to himself rather than her. "I have not been a very dutiful son myself," a shadow crossing his dark features.

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Beatrix again had no answer ready.

She went on quietly grouping her flowers into a large bunch. He watched the white hands with a lazy, æsthetic pleasure in their beauty as they gleamed among the crimson flowers of which she had gathered a larger quantity than of any other color.

He began to talk to her of the city where she lived, of the places she had visited, of people whom he supposed the Gordons would know. He was amazed at her ignorance on subjects where he would have supposed her to be at home.

"I have been to very few places, and I know very few people," she said, blushing. "I—I haven't been introduced into society yet. I am too young."

"Then where did she pick up that lover?" he asked himself. "She must have become infatuated with her dancing-master or her music-master."

But that evening when Mrs. Le Roy opened the piano and asked her to play, Beatrix begged to be excused. Being pressed, she declared that she had never learned the piano, she did not care for music—at least not very much.

No one expressed the surprise they felt. St. Leon played an aria for his mother, then they closed the piano.

"So it was not her music-master who won her heart. The circle narrows down to the professor of the terpsichorean art," he said to himself.

"My dear, I have been watching you closely," said Mrs. Le Roy, suddenly. "You do not at all resemble your mother. She had blue eyes, yours are black. Her features were quite different from yours. I have seen your father, but I forget how he looked. I suppose you are like him."

"Yes, I am like my father," Beatrix answered, but her face crimsoned, and she looked as if she were about to burst into tears. She commanded herself with an effort, and a little later, declaring that her head ached, she begged to be excused, and left the room.

"Poor girl! she is very unhappy!" said Mrs. Le Roy. "Isabel Gordon was very careless to let that child have a lover! She has no business out of the school-room."

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## CHAPTER VII.

Beatrix went swiftly to the pretty dressing-room, where the maid was, busy sewing on a dinner-dress of pink nuns' veiling for her beautiful young mistress. She sunk down upon a chair and looked at Clarice with somber, miserable eyes.

"Oh, Clarice, I shall have to give it all up," she panted. "They suspect me—I am quite sure they do!"

Clarice looked frightened and disturbed, and even reproachful.

"Oh, Miss Gordon, don't say that," she exclaimed. "After all the drilling you've had, a clever, pretty girl like you ought to be able to act your part. But it's just as I told you to-day. You're too timid and nervous."

"Because I am conscious of my guilt," answered the girl, sadly. "I should not be timid and nervous in my own proper character, Clarice. But you know 'conscience makes cowards of us all.' Besides, I am ignorant on many subjects which Beatrix Gordon ought to know well. The people and places they ask me about I know nothing of, and they look surprised. To-day Mrs. Le Roy asked me to play on the piano. When I said I did not know how, I wish you could have seen their faces!"

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"That was rather bad. The most of young ladies know how to play on the piano," said Clarice. "But anyhow they couldn't make out a case against you for that. You might have said that you didn't care for music."

"So I did, but the lie almost blistered my lips," said the girl, "for I love music dearly, and when Mr. Le Roy played a beautiful aria I was afraid he would see my delight on my face."

"You must be careful over that. Stick to your text," warned the maid. "If you make them think you don't like music they will not think it strange you cannot play. Was there anything else unpleasant?"

"Yes; Mrs. Le Roy told me I did not at all resemble my mother. Oh, I was so frightened when she began. My heart sprung to my lips!"

"What did you say?" asked Clarice, attentively.

"I told them I resembled my father—that was true at least," answered Beatrix, sighing.

"Well, the game is not lost yet," said Clarice. "Courage, Miss Gordon—hold your own bravely as you can. Remember all that is lost if you fail."

"I try to remember it," sighed the girl. "If it were not for *her*, Clarice, I should break down, I know I should. It is terrible to be living a lie. Oh, Clarice, do you think she is very happy now?"

"Happy as a queen," said Clarice, enthusiastically: "and she was so good and sweet she deserved it. Oh, you mustn't regret that you made a little sacrifice for her! And is it a sacrifice, after all? Look at this grand, beautiful home, all this luxury around you. Where would you be if my mistress hadn't sent you here?"

Where, indeed? The false Beatrix Gordon shivered as if with ague, her face blanched to a pallid hue. She thought of the homeless outcasts in the horrible streets, of the dark, flowing river, of St. Leon Le Roy's careless words to her that day: "I would throw myself into the river, and so end all!"

"I should not do that unless I were driven to desperation," said the girl to herself with unconscious bravery.

She looked through the window out upon the beautiful grounds.

"It is a lovely home," she said. "I could be very happy here if I had no shadow on my heart. But I cannot forget my sin. I remember always some lines that I have read:

'Some flowers of Eden we still inherit,  
But the trail of the serpent is over them all.'

"I would not call it a sin if I were you," said Clarice. "That is too harsh a name. My mistress did not call it so. She said it was only a justifiable counter plot, only a harmless, girl's conspiracy."

"She ought to know best. She is older and wiser than I am," said the girl, with a gleam of hope on her face. [Pg 19]

Clarice was very clever for a girl in her situation. As she worked away steadily on the pink dress, she artfully followed up the impression her last words had made:

"For my part I think it is the best joke I ever heard of. I do not pity the Gordons one bit. They deserve to be fooled!" she said. "There was no fault in Miss Gordon's lover, only he was not as rich as she was."

"Poverty is almost a crime in the eyes of the rich—is it not?" asked her mistress thoughtfully.

"Yes," Clarice answered, almost tartly, and she began to hum under her breath:

'"Dollars and dimes, dollars and dimes,  
An empty pocket is the worst of crimes!'"

Her young mistress remained gazing thoughtfully from the window, the sad expression of her face hidden by the falling waves of her golden hair. Deep, heavy sighs breathed at intervals over her lips.

Several days passed quietly without anything occurring to frighten our masquerading heroine again. The Le Roys gave no sign of their surprise at anything that occurred. They had, in fact, concluded that a great deal of her oddness and originality arose from the fact of the lover in the case. When she looked sad, as she often did, they concluded she was thinking of him. When St. Leon actually came upon her weeping silently one day he thought it was on account of the separation from our hero.

It vexed him. He did not go away and leave her alone, as his mother would have done. He said to her, sarcastically:

"Are you crying for your mamma, little girl?"

Beatrix flashed him a swift, angry look through her tears, and answered:

"No!"

"At least she has the grace to be honest," he said to himself.

Some curiosity came over him regarding the man who had won the heart of this girl. He would have liked to know his name, and what he looked like, and if he was worthy of the prize he had won.

"Confide in me, Miss Gordon," he said, obeying an impulse he could not himself understand. "Tell me what your trouble is. Perhaps I can help you."

Beatrix shuddered in horror. Ah, if he knew, how little he would be inclined to help her. Rather he would spurn her from the proud gates of Eden.

"You are very kind," she faltered. "I thank you, but it is nothing."

He looked at her a little scornfully.

"I have heard that women cry for nothing," he said. "I suppose it must be true, as I now hear it confirmed by one of the sex."

She seldom saw him except at meals, and a little while in the drawing-room of an evening. The

most of his time was spent in the library or out riding and walking. But one day he came to her abruptly.

"I am going up to New York for a few days," he said. "I hope you will make use of my library while I am out of the way." [Pg 20]

"Thank you," she said, radiantly.

"If I should see your parents," he continued, "shall I give them any message for you?"

She started, and the crimson rose she was holding fell from her hands. He wondered why she grew so deadly pale, and trembled so. The sudden radiance of a moment ago had all gone from her face.

"Give them my love," she said in a husky voice, "and tell them—tell them that I am greatly enjoying my visit to Eden."

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## CHAPTER VIII.

St. Leon came home one afternoon and made his way straight to the library. The thickly carpeted floor gave back no echo to his footfalls, and he stood on the threshold of the room several minutes gazing in at the open door unobserved by the single occupant of the apartment.

As he had shrewdly suspected, his mother's guest had availed herself to the full of his permission to use the library in his absence.

Quite oblivious of his near presence now, Beatrix was curled up in his great easy-chair in a cozy, kittenish attitude, her warm flushed cheek buried in the hollow of one small hand, her dark eyes bent in rapt interest on an open book in her lap. A ray of sunshine stealing through the lace curtains at the window penciled golden bars on her white dress and bright hair, making her look like a picture to whose beauty St. Leon's cultured eyes were by no means oblivious. He hesitated to startle her from her pretty negligent attitude, but as he gazed his mesmeric eyes irresistibly attracted hers. She glanced up and met his dark, burning eyes fixed with a strange inscrutable expression upon her own.

Instantly Beatrix sprung up, the book falling to the floor, a little cry of surprise on her lips, her face paling, a look of inexplicable terror in her dark eyes.

"Am I an ogre that you do me the honor to be frightened at me, Miss Gordon?" he inquired, advancing into the room, a tone of displeasure in his deep, musical voice.

"I—I was not frightened—only startled, sir," said Beatrix, faintly, as she stooped to recover her book.

She laid it upon the table and was about to leave the room when he stopped her with a slight wave of his gloved hand.

"Resume your seat, Miss Gordon. I shall not believe you are not frightened if you run away like this," he said.

She sat down with a gasp and waited. She had been full of vague fears and suspicions regarding his visit to New York. She waited with a beating heart and a pale face for his next words. He would say, with that fine scorn his mobile face was so capable of expressing:

"You are found out in your miserable conspiracy, Laurel Vane. You have come here pretending to be Mr. Gordon's daughter while you covered her elopement with her lover. The true Beatrix Gordon is far away, married to the man she has chosen, in defiance of her parents and friends. Punishment cannot reach her, but you, Laurel Vane, will have to suffer for the outrage you have helped to perpetrate on the Gordons and on us." [Pg 21]

While she waited with a sick horror to hear him utter those words, she wondered vaguely what they would do to her for her share in Beatrix Gordon's conspiracy. Could they cast her into prison? She had seen the outside of a penitentiary once. How grim and dark and forbidding it looked with its iron doors and grated windows? Would they shut her up in all her youth and beauty in such a horrible place as that, and for how long? She shuddered as she thought that it might be for life. She had no idea, in her youth and innocence, how far and how long the powerful arm of the law could reach.

But the dreadful words for which she waited while a hand of ice seemed to grip her throat, remained unspoken.

Mr. Le Roy seated himself leisurely and drew off his dark kid gloves. Then he took up the volume she had been reading, and glanced at the title.

"I hope you have enjoyed your monopoly of my library," he said.

"Yes," she answered, faintly.

"And you are sorry I have returned to oust you from its enjoyments—aren't you?" he asked, studying her young face keenly.

"I should be very rude to say so," she answered, gaining courage as the dreadful charge for which she waited was delayed.



"As to that you cannot be ruder than I was in desiring you to stay out of this room while I was at home," he replied, with an air of insincerity. "Will you pardon my selfishness, Miss Gordon, and permit me to remove the embargo?"

She could scarcely believe her ears. His tone was distinctly kind. Had he, then, found out nothing? Was her secret safe yet a little longer?

Seeing that she hesitated, and did not speak, he continued:

"I give you *carte blanche* as to the use of this room whether I am absent or present. Will you come here whenever you choose, to read, or write, or study? You will not disturb me, neither shall I disturb you."

"Thank you," she murmured, not yet daring to look at him.

"You thank me, but you do not say you will come," he said. "Will you please to look at me a moment, Miss Gordon? I like to be looked at when I am talking."

With an effort she lifted her long fringed lashes, and forced herself to meet his proud, glittering dark eyes.

"I am a spoiled child. I like to be humored," he said, with a smile that lighted his face into a subtle sweetness that first showed her how dangerously fascinating the master of Eden could be when he willed. "I want you to tell me, Miss Gordon, that you forgive my selfishness the other day, and that you will come to this room as freely as to any other room in the house. You will promise me, will you not? No one ever refuses *me* anything!"

"There is nothing to forgive—you had a right"—she said, incoherently. "If there was—and mind, I do not admit there was—I forgive you freely."

"Thank you. And you will come?"

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"Sometimes—perhaps," she stammered.

He pulled at his dark mustache impatiently.

"I must have a more definite promise than that," he said. "I am used to having my way about everything."

Though the words were arrogant, the tone was kind. He was thoroughly in earnest. She hesitated. She did not want to be drawn into such a promise, standing too much in awe of the stately master of Eden.

"You will not promise," he said, piqued. "Very well. But you are the first woman who ever refused a request of St. Leon Le Roy's. Your forgiveness was only half hearted."

He was more vexed than she knew. His wonderful condescension had not borne the fruit he expected. He leaned back in his chair with his elbow on the table, and pulled at his dark mustache with his shapely fingers, the costly diamond on his hand flashing luridly.

"What a stubborn little mite it is to refuse to humor me," he thought to himself in displeasure.

While the small object of his displeasure watched the door with longing eyes, yearning to escape from the oppressive dignity of his presence, she felt herself growing crimson under his cold, proud gaze.

"You have not asked me yet if I saw your parents," he said, after some minutes of that oppressive silence.

"It is coming now," thought the small culprit in despair, and she felt guiltily that the color was all fading out of her cheeks under those watchful eyes. She could only stammer, faintly, "Did you?"

To her infinite joy and relief, he answered in the negative.

"No, I did not see them. I called twice, but at both times they were out—once driving in the park, and again attending a reception."

"You do not look sorry, Miss Gordon, although it was purely out of courtesy to you that I went there."

"Indeed, I am very sorry," she murmured, but she could not make her face look so.

His words were so great a relief to her that she could not look disappointed. He did not tell her how disappointed he was. He would not have owned to himself that he had hoped to hear something about that lover from whom they had separated her. He would even have liked to have seen him. It was a new thing for the *blasé*, world-weary St. Leon Le Roy to feel curious over anything; but he had a great deal of curiosity over the man whom Beatrix Gordon loved.

"I should like to know if he is worthy of her," was his excuse to his own heart.

But he had not seen the Gordons, and he had found out nothing about their daughter's lover.

"If he is good and true and noble I should like to help the child to happiness," he said to himself. "If he is an ignoble fortune-hunter, as they say, I should most decidedly try to forward the Gordons' plot."

And it was rather curious that in his own mind he had quite decided that the unknown young man was a villain of the deepest dye. He pitied Beatrix for having fallen in love with a scamp who was only after her money. But as the days went by a change came over Beatrix that puzzled him.

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Some of her shyness, her timidity, her sadness wore off. A look of contentment dawned on the

fair face and in the dark eyes. Her cheeks gained color and roundness. She even laughed sometimes, a mellow laugh that was so sweet and glad it thrilled one's heart to hear it. Mrs. Le Roy was puzzled.

"She is certainly not pining for her lover," she said to her son. "At first she was so strange and sad I thought she was breaking her heart over him. But she is so young it is likely that change of scene has driven him completely out of her mind. The Gordons did well to send her here."

The day came when she changed her mind on that latter point.

In her heart Mrs. Le Roy had a secret fancy that the charms of her son had quite blotted out the image of Beatrix's absent lover from her young heart. Not that St. Leon or Beatrix gave her any reason to think so, but the wish was father to the thought. She would have been delighted if these two had fallen in love with each other, for the greatest desire of her heart was to see St. Leon married.

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## CHAPTER IX.

In the private parlor of a neat hotel in a city not very far from New York, the true Beatrix Gordon was sitting one lovely morning awaiting the coming of her husband.

Although Beatrix had deceived and deserted her parents, and foisted an impostor on the aristocratic Le Roys, she looked positively and undeniably happy this bright summer morning. Her lovely blonde face, with its crown of soft golden hair, glowed with love and happiness, and her beauty was enhanced by her becoming morning-dress of soft pale blue with delicate trimmings of rich cream tinted lace.

The door opened suddenly, and Cyril Wentworth, her handsome young husband, entered with a letter in his hand. He kissed his fair young bride, and held the delicate envelope tantalizingly out of reach.

"At last!" cried young Mrs. Wentworth eagerly, and she sprung upon a chair and gayly possessed herself of her letter. "It is from my sweet little Laurel."

She tore it open and ran her eyes quickly over the contents, while her husband watched her expressive face with deep anxiety.

She finished at last, and turned her fond, smiling blue eyes upon Cyril's questioning face.

"All goes well," she said. "They have not discovered my charming little plot yet. Papa and mamma have written, and they are both as well as usual. Clarice answered their letters, and imitated my hand and style so well that they were completely imposed upon."

"Clarice must be a clever maid," said Cyril.

"She is," said Beatrix. "Her education is far above that of her class generally. She was very valuable to me. I hated to part with her, but I was obliged to send her to Eden to keep up appearances, answer mamma's letters, and keep Laurel Vane up to her part." [Pg 24]

"And when is this farce to end?" asked Cyril.

"Oh, not for several months yet, if I can help it," answered the pretty bride, looking frightened at the very idea.

"But why keep it up so long? I cannot understand your reluctance to have your parents learn the truth, love. They cannot forbid the bans now, for we are united as fast as Church and State can bind us," said Cyril Wentworth, who had an honest, open nature; and now that he had won his bonny bride, longed to have the whole world hear what a prize he had won.

"I have a secret reason, Cyril, darling," said the fair bride, twining her arms about his neck, and looking up in his face with sweet, shining eyes. "If Laurel plays her part well and I can keep our marriage a secret a few months, some great good fortune will come to us, Cyril. If not—if it is all found out sooner—why, then," with a little contented sigh, "I shall still have you, my dear. Fate cannot take you from me!"

"I am dying of curiosity, darling," laughed Cyril Wentworth.

"No matter. You shall not hear one word till the time is up," answered Beatrix, gayly. "I forbid you to even think of the matter again, sir!"

"Your wishes are my law," answered the lover-husband, in a tone as gay as hers.

"There is one thing that troubles me," she said, presently, running her eyes again over the letter which she still held open in her hand. "Laurel writes me that Mrs. Le Roy's son has returned from his European tour, and is at Eden."

"Why should that trouble you, dearest?" he inquired, tenderly.

"Do you not see that the chances of discovery are doubled, Cyril? Mrs. Le Roy seldom leaves home, and would be far more likely to be imposed upon by our little conspiracy than would her keen-witted son. Laurel writes me that he is keen, critical, brusque. She is afraid of him."

"I have a fancy about this Mr. Le Roy," said Cyril, lightly. "He will fall in love with the pretty little impostor and marry her."

Beatrix looked grave and troubled at this novel suggestion.

"Oh, *that* would never do," she cried. "My little Laurel is as beautiful as a dream, but she is not a fitting mate for St. Leon Le Roy. He is wealthy and aristocratic, and, I have heard, as proud as Lucifer. And she—a drunken journalist's daughter! No, no, that would never do, Cyril. She would not dare! I am not afraid of such a thing. She shall come and live with me and be like my own sister when her stay at Eden is over, and we shall find her a husband more suitable to her than St. Leon Le Roy!"

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## CHAPTER X.

Two months had passed, and Laurel Vane still remained at Eden, in her character of Mr. Gordon's daughter. The clever conspiracy had not been discovered yet.

Indeed there seemed less chance of this catastrophe than at first. Laurel, with ready adaptability, was beginning to fit herself into her place. Under Clarice's constant tuitions and admonitions, her shyness and timidity had been somewhat overcome, and a pretty, graceful ease had replaced it. Her beauty had expanded and increased like a flower in the sunshine. As the first restraint of her manner wore off, she developed a rare grace and winning sweetness that, added to her native originality, made her very charming. Mrs. Le Roy, in her stately, quiet way, had grown fond of her guest.

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"Although there could not be a greater contrast imagined than exists between Beatrix and her mother, I am inclined to give the palm to the former," she confided to St. Leon. "I was fond of Mrs. Gordon when she was a girl. She was a fair, sweet young girl, but she lacked the charms that distinguish Beatrix. The girl makes me think of some beautiful, timid, wild bird."

"At first you thought her awkward and uncultivated," said St. Leon, carelessly.

"It was mere shyness that has worn off long ago," answered Mrs. Le Roy. "She puzzles me still, but she no longer appears awkward and uncultured. Still I admit that her education has been an unconventional one. She knows little that a girl in her position might be expected to know. On the contrary, she has some attainments not to be looked for. She knows German and Latin and some French, but she has no accomplishments, and she cannot play the piano. She says her father educated her. I take it he is a peculiar person."

"Rather, I should say," St. Leon assents, with his slightly bored air.

"Anyhow, I believe she is perfectly cured of her fancy for that—that person. I have never heard his name yet—have you, St. Leon?"

"Yes; it is Cyril Wentworth."

"A good name. Is it possible that Beatrix told you?" exclaims his mother.

"No; I heard it once, by the merest accident, on one of my trips to New York," St. Leon answers, with bland indifference.

"And—a—ah!—what kind of a man is he, St. Leon? As black as he was painted?"

"By no means—they say even the devil is not that, you know," with a short, dry laugh. "I have even seen the fellow. He is comparatively poor—I should say that that is the worst there is to him."

"Handsome?"

"As Apollo—and better still—*young*," he answers, with a short, dry laugh that has a ring of bitterness in it.

The mother's heart, quick in instinct, catches the subtle intonation of almost envy in that one concluding word.

She lays her white hand on his shoulder and looks up into the handsome, proud, world-weary face with its cold, curled lips—not pityingly—St. Leon has never borne pity in his life—but with fondest love and admiration.

"As young as you, St. Leon?" she asks, speciously solving his unacknowledged wound.

"Why, mother, how you talk!" he says, not unkindly. "Why, I am *old*. Thirty five my last birthday, and the crow's-feet, and gray hairs not so far away!"

"Do you care, my son?" she asks him, a little wistfully.

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"Care—why should I?" he asks, frowning. "And yet I have no mind to contradict the poet, who says:

"The loss of youth is sadness  
To all who think or feel—  
A wound no after gladness  
Can ever wholly heal;  
And yet so many share it,  
We learn at last to bear it."

His glance wanders from the window out into the beautiful grounds, where Laurel Vane is wandering, bright-eyed, bright-haired, lovely, in the golden springtime of youth.

"Sweet face, swift eyes, and gleaming  
Sun-gifted mingling hair—  
Lips like two rose-buds dreaming  
In June's fruit-scented air.  
Life, when her spring days meet her,  
Hope, when her angels greet her,  
Is not more calm—nor sweeter,  
And love is not more fair."

"After all, there is nothing on earth so beautiful as youth," he says, aloud, his dark eyes following the flutter of that white robe among the trees.

She looks furtively past him and sees Laurel, too, the sunlight shining on the fair young face, her white apron-overskirt heaped high with flowers after her usual fashion, the refrain of a song on her lips that floats back to them in snatches. It is Mrs. Browning's—"The Lady's Yes."

"Yes, I answered you last night,  
No, this morning, sir, I say—  
Colors seen by candle-light,  
Will not look the same by day.

"When the viols played their best,  
Lamps above and laughs below,  
Love me sounded like a jest,  
Fit for yes, or fit for no."

Mrs. Le Roy laid her delicate hand, all glittering with jewels, on the shoulder of her idolized son.

"St. Leon, you talk of growing old," she said. "My son, does not the flight of time remind you that you are neglecting a duty you owe to yourself?"

He turned to look curiously into her face, and the white figure out among the trees wandered further away, seeking new delights, like the bright-winged butterflies, among the flowers. The echo of her song died in the distance.

"Duty, mother," he said, carelessly. "I did not know that the vocabulary of my life contained that hard word. I thought all I had to do was to 'eat, drink, and'"—sarcastically—"be merry."

"St. Leon, you are but feigning ignorance of my meaning," she said, wistfully. "You understand me."

"Upon my honor, no," he said. "Explain yourself."

"You should marry."

A dark-red flush crept under his olive skin. His slender, straight black brows met in a frown over the proud dark eyes. [Pg 27]

"I thought we had dropped that subject ages ago," he said, frigidly.

"Forgive me," pleadingly. "I cannot help but revive it again. St. Leon, when you quoted that epicurean motto, 'eat, drink, and be merry,' you forgot that latter clause, 'for to-morrow we *die*.'"

He shrugged his broad shoulders impatiently.

"Well?" he said.

"For to-morrow we *die*," she repeated. "And oh, St. Leon, there is no heir to Eden!"

"*Quelle importe?*" lifting his dark brows with a slight gesture of indifference.

"Oh, my son, do not treat it with indifference," she cried. "You are the last Le Roy of your race. The fine old name will die with you, the wealth of the Le Roys will pass to strangers, unless you marry and leave an heir. I am proud. I cannot bear to have it thus. Oh, St. Leon, choose yourself a wife and me a daughter from among the fair dames of your own land."

Her handsome, haughty old face was transformed with emotion, her dark eyes dim with tears. He turned from the sight of it and looked from the window again, but the slim white figure no longer gleamed among the green trees and the bright *parterres* of flowers. It had strayed out of sight.

"Where shall I find you a daughter worthy of your love, my lady mother?" he said, lightly, yet with some intangible emotion beneath his tone.

She hesitated, and her glance, too, wandered from the window and came back disappointed.

"St. Leon, what do you think of Beatrix Gordon?" she asked, wistfully.

The dark eyes flashed.

"For shame, mother! Would I steal another man's betrothed?" he said.

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Meanwhile, Laurel Vane had strayed carelessly on to the gates of Eden, the light song still

lingering on her lips, the light of the day reflected in her eyes and on her face. She was learning to be happy, this beautiful girl over whose unconscious head hung the shadow of long years of sorrow.

She leaned her arm on the rustic gate and looked wonderingly, as she often did, across the dusty carriage-road at the beautiful river.

"Should I ever be coward enough to throw myself into its dark depths, and 'so end all'?" she asked herself, with sudden gravity.

A sudden step, the dark figure of a man looming before her, made her lift her wide, dark eyes. A cry of mingled horror, loathing, and fear burst from her lips.

"Ross Powell!"

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## CHAPTER XI.

If Laurel Vane was thunderstruck at the unexpected sight of the villain who had so deeply insulted her helpless innocence in New York, Ross Powell on the other hand was delighted. His bold eyes gleamed with evil joy, his thin lips curled in a mocking smile.

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"Miss Vane," he exclaimed, "is it possible that I find you again after all my fruitless search? But I might have known that such an angel would fly to Eden!"

Horror unutterable had seized upon Laurel. The song had died on her lips, the color fled from her face, she stared at her foe with parted lips, from which the breath came in palpitating gasps, while her wide, terrified eyes had the anguished look of some hunted creature.

He had come to betray her, she said to herself. All was ended now. He had found her out. He would tell the Le Roys who she was, and how she had deceived them. She could fancy Mrs. Le Roy's scathing words of condemnation. She could imagine the lightning scorn in St. Leon's proud, cold eyes.

Stifling the moan upon her lips, she cried out in passionate despair:

"Ross Powell, what has brought you here?"

"I might ask you the same question," he returned, coolly. "It certainly never entered my mind that I should find the daughter of Louis Vane a visitor at Eden."

He had spoken unwarily. His words let in a sudden light upon her mind.

He had not traced her here then. Whatever had brought him to Eden it had been some other cause than the denunciation of Beatrix Gordon's plot.

Her heart leaped with hope, then sunk heavily again. He was here, and he would find her out. She could trust to his hate and his desire for vengeance for that.

Obeying a sudden, desperate impulse, she pushed open the gate and stepped out into the road.

"You are right," she said, bitterly. "Do you think that the proud, rich Le Roys would have Laurel Vane for their guest? My errand at Eden is done, Mr. Powell. Let me pass, if you please."

He stood before her, dumbfounded at her coolness, glancing from her pale, agitated face to the flowers she carried in her apron with ostentatious care.

"Your errand," he stammered. "The flowers?"

"Yes," she answered, calmly. "I must take them home. Will you please to stand out of the way, Mr. Powell?"

"One moment," he said, still hindering her way. "Where is your home? Where can I find you?"

Her eyes flashed scornfully upon him.

"What can it matter to you?" she said. "Do you think I would receive you in my home? You, the cowardly insulter of helpless girlhood? Never! I hate you as I hate the slimy, crawling serpent! You have nothing to do with me. Out of my way!"

He caught her fiercely by the arm and hissed:

"I shall find you out! Be sure of that, my incarnation of indignant virtue! And when I do, Laurel Vane, you shall find that the serpent you hate can sting!"

She tried to shake off the brutal grasp of his fingers, but he held her in a grasp of steel and would not let her go.

"You hurt me," she said, desperately. "Release my arm, Ross Powell, or I will scream for help. I hear carriage-wheels coming. Whoever it is I will appeal for protection."

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The threat had the hoped-for effect. He threw her arm from him with a smothered oath. Laurel pushed quickly past him and walked on down the road. A carriage rattled past, and under cover of the cloud of dust it raised she looked furtively back at her worsted foe. He had entered the gate of Eden and was walking slowly up the graveled path to the house.

"He is really going there," she said, trembling, "and, O Heaven, upon what mission? He is Mr. Gordon's clerk, and he has come upon some errand to Beatrix Gordon. They will send out to

search for me, and he will learn the truth. I cannot go back. I am afraid! I must hide myself until he is gone!"

Her trembling limbs would scarcely support her, but she walked on as fast as she could, her mind filled with vague conjectures and dire suspicions.

"Perhaps Mr. Gordon has sent for Beatrix to return home," she thought, despairingly. "Then the conspiracy will all be discovered. I shall be driven away from beautiful Eden."

A pang like a dagger's thrust pierced her heart at the thought. She looked back at the towered and turreted mansion, and the beautiful extensive grounds, with something of that hopeless despair our first mother must have felt on leaving Paradise.

The scent of the flowers she carried filled her with keenest pain.

"Shall I ever dare go back?" she said. "Am I going away for the last time now, with no home, no friends to turn to in my despair—with nothing but these flowers, and—a memory?"

As she plodded slowly along she came to a little private gate in the rustic fence that inclosed Eden. It led into a picturesque, bosky dell, with running streams, leafy shades, cool, green turf, and beds of wild flowers and exquisite ferns. The master of Eden carried the key to this private entrance, often preferring it to the more ostentatious front gate, with its imposing lions keeping grim watch and ward.

Laurel paused and leaned her arms on the low fence, and gazed at the cool light and shade that flickered on the green grass beneath the waving boughs of the trees. The hot, dusty road was disagreeable. She longed to go inside and throw herself down to rest. No one from the house ever came here except St. Leon Le Roy, and he but seldom. It was a favorite haunt of Laurel's, and it struck her now that it would be an excellent hiding-place.

Sighing at its inaccessibility Laurel bowed her head on her hands, and the first thing that caught the sight of her downcast eyes was the glitter of the steel key on the inside of the gate, where Mr. Le Roy had inadvertently left it that morning.

With a cry of joy Laurel slipped her hand through the iron bars of the gate, unlocked it, and entered.

Then she hastened to the remotest retreat on the grounds, a little natural bower, formed by the thick interlacing boughs of the trees and vines that grew thickly and luxuriantly close by a clear meandering stream, rippling on with a pleasant murmur. Laurel threw herself down at the foot of a tree in this sylvan retreat, and leaning her head on her hand, listened pensively to the song of the birds and the musical murmur of the little streamlet. Her heart beat more calmly in the solitude and stillness that was only broken by the sweet sounds of nature. A little hope flickered feebly to life in her breast.

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"Clarice is so clever she will save me, perhaps," she whispered to herself.

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## CHAPTER XII.

In the meantime Ross Powell with his mind full of his rencounter with Laurel, and his passions all aflame with love and hate commingled, wended his way to the stately home of the Le Roys.

It was true as Laurel had conjectured that he had come on business with Beatrix Gordon, but the sudden, exciting meeting with the dead author's daughter had almost driven his employer's business out of his mind. He determined to get through this interview with Miss Gordon as soon as possible, that he might gain time to trace the scornful Laurel to her home.

His disappointment was accordingly great when he was informed that Miss Gordon had gone for a walk. On his polite intimation that he had but an hour to remain Clarice was sent out to bring her mistress in.

Pretty, clever Clarice, having informed herself as to the identity of the visitor, departed on her errand, her quick brain teeming with plans to avoid the threatened exposure.

And Ross Powell waited his little hour, and saw the sunset gleams kindling the waves of the Hudson with gold, and still she came not. Impatience burned to fever-heat in his breast, though he was outwardly calm and deferentially polite to Mrs. Le Roy and her stately son.

The master of Eden inspired him with some little awe. He shrunk from the keen, clear glances of the cynical dark eyes. They seemed to pierce through him and read his shallow, selfish nature to the core. He felt his own littleness by contrast with the calm, proud bearing of St. Leon Le Roy, and resented it with carefully concealed anger.

While he waited for Miss Gordon's coming, he ventured nonchalantly on one leading question.

Could they tell him if there was a young lady staying in the neighborhood named Laurel Vane?

"Laurel Vane—what a sweet, pretty name," said Mrs. Le Roy. "No, I do not believe there is. I have never heard the name before."

"It is possible that she may be occupying some subordinate position—a governess, perhaps," suggested Mr. Powell.

"I do not know, I have never heard of her," said the hostess, carelessly; then, appealing to her son, "Have you, St. Leon?"

And he, in his blindness, answered:

"No."

Ross Powell did not know how to believe them. Had he not met her coming out of their grounds, loaded with their rare flowers? He asked himself what interest these rich people had in deceiving him about Laurel Vane. While he puzzled over the question a sudden solution presented itself to his mind. She must be figuring under an assumed name. These rich Le Roys could have had no interest in deceiving him about humble little Laurel Vane.

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He did not know how nearly his chance conjecture had hit the mark.

But his suspicions made him all the more eager to get away and seek for her. If she had really been clever enough to hide herself under a fictitious name, she would be all the harder to find. The difficulty only made him more zealous in pursuit.

He assumed an air of polite regret, and began to pave his way to departure.

"I am afraid I cannot await Miss Gordon's return any longer this evening, as I have a friend waiting for me at the hotel," he said. "But indeed there is no real necessity that I should see her at all beyond the pleasure her father would experience in hearing that I had done so. I will call again in the morning, and perhaps find her at home. In the meantime," he drew two letters and a small package from his breast, "I am the bearer of a letter to you, Mrs. Le Roy, and one for Miss Gordon, with this packet and her father's love. I shall be pleased to receive your answer in the morning before I return to New York."

He presented them and bowed himself out, so eager to find Laurel Vane that he gave scarcely a thought to Miss Gordon's defection.

The deepening twilight fell, and still neither Clarice nor her mistress returned.

Mrs. Le Roy began to feel some little anxiety.

"She never stayed out like this before," she said to St. Leon. "Can she have eluded us, and eloped with her lover? I am afraid I have allowed her too much liberty. What do you think, St. Leon?"

There was a gloomy flash in his eyes, but before he could speak Clarice came running in, breathless and eager, with genuine alarm on her face.

"Has he gone?" she gasped.

"An hour ago," said Mrs. Le Roy. "Where is Miss Gordon, Clarice?"

"Oh, Mrs. Le Roy, I cannot find her anywhere," gasped the girl, in a frightened tone.

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## CHAPTER XIII.

There was genuine alarm on the maid's pretty, intelligent face. Mrs. Le Roy was startled.

"Have you been all over the grounds? Are you sure you have looked everywhere?" she cried.

"Oh, ma'am, I do not think I have missed a single spot," cried Clarice, wringing her hands. "I have been all over Eden. I have been out into the road, and along the river bank. I am afraid she has thrown herself into the water!"

St. Leon looked at her with his piercing dark eyes.

"Why should she do that?" he asked her, sharply.

"Oh, sir, surely you know she was very unhappy," she faltered.

"About her lover?" asked Mrs. Le Roy.

"Ye—es, madam," faltered the maid, weakly.

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St. Leon had crossed to the door. He came back and laid his strong protecting hand gently on his mother's shoulder, and looked down into her troubled face.

"Mother, do not be frightened," he said. "I will find Beatrix for you. Ring for lights, and let Clarice stay here with you. I will search for the child."

The words kindled a gleam of hope in her breast. She did not see how deathly white his own face had grown.

He left her, and went out into the grounds on his self-appointed mission of finding the missing girl. A new moon had risen, piercing the twilight darkness with shafts of mellow light. In its mystic rays the white graveled walks and groups of marble statuary glimmered ghostly pale and wan. Clarice's apprehensive words rang in his ears:

"I am afraid she has thrown herself into the water."

"Not that—oh, not that," he said to himself.

He left the more open grounds and went out into the thick shrubberies. The dew was falling heavily, and the fragrance of flowers was borne on the air. The almost oppressive sweetness of

the tube-rose, then at the height of its blooming, stole gently on his senses, but ever afterward it was connected in his mind with a sense of loss and pain.

"Beatrix, Beatrix!" he called ever and anon, in his eager search, but no sweet voice replied, no slender, white-clad form bounded out from among the dark green trees. He felt a strange sense of dreariness in his search for Cyril Wentworth's missing love.

"She was very unhappy—I had begun to forget that," he said to himself. "She had changed so much I thought she was beginning to forget that episode with Cyril Wentworth. Was her apparent indifference only a clever mask? Has she fled with him?"

He crushed something like a bitter execration between his lips at the thought, and went on crashing madly through the shrubbery, and so came out into the quiet dell where Beatrix had hidden that evening in her frantic dread of Ross Powell.

He followed the course of the little singing stream that tried to tell him in its musical murmur, "She is here, she is here," but he was deaf to Nature's voice. His heart's cry drowned it.

"Why am I seeking her here?" he muttered, bitterly. "My mother was right. She has had too much liberty. Cyril Wentworth has stolen her away."

Nay, a sudden lance-like gleam of the silvery moonlight broke through the interlacing boughs of the trees and touched with a pencil of light a little white heap of something huddled under the bowing trees. He went nearer, knelt down, and a cry of joy broke from his stern, mustached lips.

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## CHAPTER XIV.

She had not thrown herself into the river, she had not fled with her lover. He had wronged her in his thoughts. She was here. Like a weary child she had flung herself down with her pale cheek pillowed on one round, white arm, and was sleeping deeply, exhaustedly, with the flowers all fallen from her apron and strewed in odorous confusion about her.

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He bent his dark head low over the golden one—perhaps to listen if she slept—some murmured words fell from his lips. They sounded like "My darling," but it must have been the wind sighing in the leaves above them, or, perchance, the musical ripple of the little streamlet. St. Leon Le Roy was too proud and cold for such a weakness.

But he did not awake her at once. He bent over her softly, and the shapely hand with its costly diamond flashing in the moonlight, moved gently over the waving ripples of golden hair in mute caress as though she had been a child.

How still and pale she lay. The white radiance of the moonlight made her look so cold and white it thrilled him with a strange terror.

"What if it were death?" he muttered, darkly, with a shiver. "Death? Well," with a sudden, baleful fierceness, "what then? Better death than surrender her to Cyril Wentworth!"

And a red-hot flame of jealousy tore his heart asunder like the keen blade of a dagger.

He gazed for a moment in almost sullen satisfaction on the white, sleeping face, then suddenly his mood changed. Something like fear and dread came into his eyes.

"Am I mad?" he asked himself, with a bitter self-reproach in his voice, and he shook her gently, while almost unconsciously he called her name aloud:

"Beatrix—darling!"

With a start she opened her eyes. She saw him bending over her with an inscrutable expression upon his face. It was frowning, fierce, almost bitterly angry. Yet all the summer night around her, her languid pulses, and her beating heart, seemed to thrill and echo to one sweet, fierce whisper. "Darling!" Had she dreamed it? Was it but the figment of her slumbering brain?

As she struggled up she put out her hands to shut out the sight of his face that seemed to frown darkly upon her. A cry broke from her lips, full of fear and deprecation.

"Do not be angry. Do not scold me!" she wailed. "I am very sorry—I—I will go away!"

"She is not half awake—she is dreaming," he said to himself, and he touched her again, gently. "Wake up, Miss Gordon," he said; "you are dreaming. I am not going to scold you, although you have given us all a terrible scare falling asleep in the grounds at this hour of the evening."

The somber, black eyes stared at him affrightedly. She did not comprehend him yet.

"Oh, Mr. Le Roy, has he told you all?" she cried, clasping her small hands tightly in the agony of her excitement. "Do you hate me, despise me? Must I go away, all alone," with a shudder, "into the dark, dark night?"

"Still dreaming," said St. Leon Le Roy to himself, and with a sudden impulse of pity he bent down, put his arms about the small white figure, and lifted her up to her feet. Then holding her gently in the clasp of one arm, he said, like one soothing a frightened child:

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"You have been asleep, Miss Gordon, and your dreams were wild. Rouse yourself now, and come into the house with me. My mother is greatly frightened at your absence!"



"Frightened," she repeated, a little vaguely, and nestling unconsciously nearer to the warm, strong arm that held her.

"Yes, you have been missing several hours, and we have all had a great fright about you. Clarice searched for you several hours, but I had the happiness of finding you," he said, gently.

"And—nothing has happened? You are not angry?" she asked, the mists beginning to clear from her brain.

"Nothing has happened, except that a gentleman came to see you and went away disappointed. I am not angry, yet I ought to be, seeing what a fright you gave me. Only think of me, Miss Gordon, rushing about the garden with my mind full of 'dire imaginings,' and finding you asleep on the grass like a tired baby. What a descent from the sublime to the ridiculous!"

She began to comprehend all and drew herself, with a blush, from the arm that still held her gently.

"Pardon me. You were half asleep and I held you to keep you from falling," he said, with cool dignity. "Shall we return to the house now? My mother is in great suspense."

"I am very sorry," she began, penitently, as she moved on quietly by his side. "I did not mean to frighten any one. You—you were very kind to come and look for me."

In her heart she was secretly singing pæans of gladness. She was not discovered yet. Her clever move that evening had thrown her enemy off his guard. Trying to keep the tremor out of her voice, she asked with apparent carelessness:

"Who was my visitor, Mr. Le Roy?"

"Whom do you imagine?" he responded.

"Was—was it Mr. Wentworth?" she inquired, with artless innocence and something in her voice that he interpreted as hope and longing.

"Do you suppose that Mr. Wentworth would be admitted inside the doors of Eden?" he inquired, with grim anger.

"Why not?" said she, timidly.

"You must know that we have our instructions from your mother," he answered, stiffly.

Laurel decided that it would be in keeping with her character of Beatrix Gordon to argue the point a little with Mr. Le Roy.

"Do you not think that mamma is a little harsh, Mr. Le Roy?" she ventured, timidly. "Mr. Wentworth is good and noble and handsome. His only fault is that he is poor."

"Therefore, he is no mate for you," St. Leon answered, almost savagely.

"But why?" she persisted, longing to hear his opinion on the subject.

"You are almost too young to understand these questions, Miss Gordon, but it ought to be perfectly obvious to you that the wealthy well-born daughter of Mr. Gordon should not descend to a simple clerk without connections, without money, and without prospects," he answered, almost brusquely.

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"Must one take no account of love?" she asked, timidly.

"Unequal marriages seldom result happily, Miss Gordon," he said, his voice full of underlying bitterness.

"You would have the rich to always wed the rich then?" she said, smothering a long, deep, bitter sigh as she awaited his answer.

"Other things being equal—yes," he responded, cruelly, and for a time they walked on silently through the moonlit paths with the thick shrubberies casting fantastic shadows along their way. St. Leon was in a savage mood, Laurel in a bitter one. She was silently recalling her maid's favorite song:

"Dimes and dollars, dollars and dimes!  
An empty pocket is the worst of crimes.  
If a man's down, give him a thrust—  
Trample the beggar into the dust!  
Presumptuous poverty is quite appalling—  
Knock him over! Kick him for falling!  
Dimes and dollars, dollars and dimes,  
An empty pocket is the worst of crimes!"

"The popular creed—why should I try to fight against it?" she asked herself, with a sinking heart. She looked up into the dark, stern face beside her. "Then I need never ask you to feel sorry for us—you will never help us to happiness—poor Cyril and me!" she said.

His dark eyes flashed.

"You do not know what you are talking about, Miss Gordon!" he said, almost savagely. "No; never ask me to help you to happiness with Cyril Wentworth. I would sooner see you dead!"

She shrank back appalled at his burst of resistless passion.

"He is hard and cruel, proud as Lucifer, and cold as ice," she sighed, inly. "I was mad to dream

that he called me darling in my sleep! One of those stars will sooner fall from the heavens than that he should descend to Laurel Vane!"

They were at the foot of the marble steps now. Just touching her arm, he led her up to the door, and turned away.

"You may go in alone and tell them the ridiculous finale to our grand scare—that you had simply fallen asleep on the grass," he said, in a brusque, careless tone. "I shall go down to the river and smoke my cigar."

And no wildest stretch of her girlish fancy could have made her believe that St. Leon Le Roy went back to the place where he had found her sleeping; that he took into his hands some of the scattered, forgotten flowers, on which her arm and cheek had lain; that he kissed them, and hid them in his breast, and then—almost cursed himself for his folly.

"I, St. Leon Le Roy, whom the fairest, proudest women in the world have loved vainly!" he cried, "I, to make myself a dolt over another man's baby-faced, childish sweetheart!"

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## CHAPTER XV.

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Laurel went slowly into the house and was received with joy by Mrs. Le Roy and Clarice. She was touched when the proud, stately lady kissed her warmly on the lips, and when she saw the trace of tears in the dark eyes, she felt conscience stricken and ashamed.

"She gives all this tenderness to Beatrix Gordon, the daughter of her old friend," she thought sadly. "If she knew the truth, she would hate me." "I am sorry and ashamed to think that I have created a sensation for nothing," she said, with frank shame. "The truth is I fell asleep in a secluded part of the grounds, and I do not know when I should have awakened if Mr. Le Roy had not found me."

The maid said to herself that it was surely the most fortunate nap her mistress had ever taken, for she had thus escaped meeting Mr. Gordon's clerk. She little dreamed of that unfortunate meeting at the gates of Eden that evening between Ross Powell and the false Beatrix Gordon.

Laurel received the letter and the packet. She opened the latter first, and found that it contained a beautiful set of pearls in a velvet-lined, Russia leather case.

"It is a beautiful gift," said Mrs. Le Roy, who was a critical judge of jewels. "It is a pity we live so quietly at Eden; you will have no chance to display them. I shall have to give a dinner-party or a reception."

"Oh, pray do not—at least on my account," panted Laurel, growing crimson, and frightened all at once. "I should not like it, indeed—that is, I mean mamma would not. I have not come out yet, you know."

"Very well, my dear, I shall not do so unless you wish. I am rather pleased that you do not care for it, for I am rather fond of seclusion and quiet myself. But I fancied it must be very dull for a pretty young girl like you," replied Mrs. Le Roy, kindly.

"Dull!" cried Laurel, with shining eyes. "I have never been so happy anywhere in my life!"

But she said to herself that she would never wear the jewels, the beautiful, shining, moon-white pearls, never! She would send them at the first opportunity to the true Beatrix Gordon.

And while Mrs. Le Roy pondered delightedly over her impulsive words, Laurel opened and read Mrs. Gordon's letter.

When she had finished, she sat for some little time in silence, musing gravely, with her small hands locked together in her lap.

"Does your letter trouble you, Beatrix?" asked Mrs. Le Roy, seeing how grave and anxious she looked.

The girl looked up.

"Mamma and papa are about to take a little Southern trip for the benefit of mamma's health," she said. "Mamma dreads the beginning of autumn in New York. The changeable weather affects her lungs unpleasantly. She has written to ask if I would like to accompany them."

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"I have received a letter of the same import from Mrs. Gordon," answered the lady. "She allows you to take your choice in the matter—to go with her, or to remain at Eden with me until she returns."

Laurel gave her a wistful, inquiring glance from her expressive eyes.

The lady interpreted it aright.

"I shall be happy if you elect to remain with me that long, my child," she answered, cordially, in answer to that mute question.

"Then I shall stay with you. I do not want to go away from beautiful Eden," cried Laurel, quickly.

"Thank you, my dear, I am gratified by your preference," Mrs. Le Roy answered, smilingly.

Little more than two months ago Mrs. Le Roy had been vexed beyond measure at the intrusion of

this stranger into her sacred family circle. Now the girl's untutored graces had won their way into her heart, and she saw with pleasure that St. Leon's first studied avoidance of the intruder had given way to a mild toleration that sometimes even relaxed into genial courtesy. The stately lady had her own plans, and it was no part of them for Beatrix Gordon to leave her now. She had written to Mrs. Gordon and confided her plans to her, meeting with that lady's cordial approval. Their mutual desires and plans for Beatrix boded no good certainly to Cyril Wentworth's happiness.

Laurel's heart beat with sudden fear and dread when she heard that Ross Powell was coming again to Eden; but Clarice gave her, unperceived, a swift, telegraphic look implying that she would manage that all right, and Laurel, confident in the cleverness of the maid, felt her beating heart grow calmer and her nervousness subside.

When Laurel went to her room that night she wrote to Mrs. Gordon, thanking her for the gift of the beautiful pearls, and expressing her desire to remain at Eden during the Southern tour. Clarice, who, in addition to her other accomplishments, was a clever chirographist, copied this letter over into a clever imitation of Beatrix Gordon's writing, and made it all ready for Mr. Powell when he should call for it the next day.

Laurel did not appear at breakfast the next morning, and Clarice carried her excuses to Mrs. Le Roy with the most innocent air in the world. Her young mistress had contracted a severe headache from her unwitting nap in the night air and dew the previous evening. It was a very natural sequence. No one dreamed of doubting it. A delicate repast of tea and toast was sent up to the sufferer who spent the day on her soft couch in a darkened room, and was, of course, quite too unwell to see her visitor when he called.

Ross Powell received the letters for Mrs. Gordon, and went away without giving much thought to the fact that he had not seen Miss Gordon. His mind was far more exercised over the fact that he had been utterly unable to find Laurel Vane.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

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Mrs. Gordon was not sorry that her daughter had preferred to stay at Eden in preference to accompanying her upon her Southern tour. It augured well for the success of the trembling hopes which she entertained in common with Mrs. Le Roy.

She sent down a letter full of affectionate regrets over their temporary separation, and followed it by a box full of new dresses and hats over which Clarice went into ecstasies of delight, and Laurel wept.

"I can never wear them—do not ask me, Clarice," she said. "They make me feel like a traitor. It is enough that I have borrowed Miss Gordon's name. I cannot take the nice things they sent her, too. I should feel like a thief."

"La me! my dear, I never saw anybody equal to you for calling a spade a spade," cried pretty Clarice. "Now, I think you are too hard upon yourself, really! You will have to wear some of these pretty things to keep up appearances as Miss Gordon. The things you brought with you, and the few dresses Miss Beatrix spared you from her wardrobe are getting shabby, and I'm afraid these proud rich people here think that your pa dresses you too poorly for your station. Besides, this is September, and you cannot go on wearing muslins and cambrics and nuns'-veiling all winter."

"I will wear them as long as I can, at least," sighed Laurel. "Besides, Clarice, who can tell how soon our little comedy may be played out—how soon Miss Wentworth may be ready to confess her clever conspiracy?"

The quick-witted maid wondered a little at the note of vague regret in Laurel's tone. The day came when she understood.

The time to which they looked forward came sooner than they thought. In a week after the Gordons went South, a letter arrived for Laurel under cover of an envelope addressed to Clarice Wells. It was from Cyril Wentworth's fair young bride, who had been hidden away securely in Brooklyn all this time, her husband pursuing his daily occupation in New York, and returning in the evening to his sweet stolen bride, no one ever suspecting that the handsome young bachelor, whom the Gordons dreaded so much, had become a Benedick.

"My sweet little Laurel," wrote grateful, happy Beatrix—"the time of your long probation is at last over. My husband has at last been offered that lucrative business tour abroad, for which my father has been plotting so cleverly ever since he started me to Eden to hide me from my darling Cyril. It's a splendid chance for a young man in Cyril's position. It will insure us a competence, if not a fortune. Oh, Laurel, my heart is singing pæans of gladness over our happy prospects! I cannot be grateful enough to you for playing your part so well, until this happy conclusion! Only think, dear—in three days we sail for Europe. I shall need Clarice to go with me, and I want you to come, too, Laurel. Cyril is not rich, but we will care for you, my darling, and you shall be like my own little sister, until some fortunate man claims you for his lovely bride. You and Clarice must come at once, dear, as we have no time to lose, and Cyril has already taken our passages on the steamer. I sold my diamonds to pay for them, so you may know by that, little Laurel, how anxious I am to have you come. Do not delay. Invent some clever excuse for leaving, and come at once to my address in Brooklyn. You need not own up to our little conspiracy, dear. I know you

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would be too frightened. Leave that to me. When we are on the eve of starting, I will write to the Le Roys, and to papa and mamma, confessing all and imploring their forgiveness."

Clarice went almost wild over that letter. She was full of joy that the clever little conspiracy had worked out so successfully, and the promised tour to Europe was the realization of the dream of her life.

"I do not believe that we can invent any good excuse for leaving Eden," she said, thoughtfully. "They would not allow us. Mrs. Gordon's orders have been too strict. We must steal away to-night, Miss Vane, and we can telegraph them to-morrow to send our luggage. Do you not think that will be the better plan to get away?"

She looked at Laurel, who had never spoken one word yet. The girl was crouching in a low seat, like one overwhelmed with sudden grief. She lifted a white face full of desperate trouble, and somber, heavy, dark eyes up to Clarice.

"Oh, Clarice, do not ask me," she wailed. "I do not want to go! I cannot, I will not leave Eden."

And with that passionate denial, Laurel Vane's little feet turned aside into that luring path of sin whose roses hide so many cruel thorns.

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## CHAPTER XVII.

"I do not want to leave Eden," repeated the dead author's daughter, passionately. "Do not ask me, Clarice! I will not go!"

Clarice Wells gazed at the pale face and somber dark eyes in alarm. Had this sudden good news turned the young lady's brain?

She went up to Laurel and shook her gently by the arm.

"Miss Vane, I do not think you understand," she said; "your probation here is over. We do not need to keep up this wretched farce any longer. Mr. Wentworth has secured his fine appointment abroad, and his wife wishes for us to go with her. Do you realize it, Miss Vane? To go abroad—to be like the sister of Mrs. Wentworth—is it not a glorious reward for the service you have done her?"

But Laurel, gazing drearily before her into vacancy, answered obstinately:

"I understand it all, Clarice, but I would rather stay at Eden."

"But why, miss?" asked the maid, astonished and half indignant.

Laurel, glancing up, saw the wonder in her eyes, and suddenly blushed a hot, burning crimson. The news had taken her by surprise, and she had spoken out unthinkingly. On being confronted with this very pertinent question from Clarice, she suddenly realized her error.

"But why, Miss Vane?" persisted Clarice. "Why should you wish to stay at Eden when you are in danger of detection every hour?"

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"I love the place. I would rather risk detection than go away," faltered Laurel, miserably.

"Well, I *am* surprised," declared the maid, in genuine consternation. "I thought you were miserable here, and that you would rejoice to get away. I cannot see what has changed you so. It isn't possible, Miss Vane," a sudden suspicion darting into her mind, "that you have lost your heart to the master of Eden?"

Speechless and shame stricken, Laurel hid her hot face in her hands, and Clarice went on, admonishing:

"If you have, you had best come away with me and think no more of it, my dear young lady. Loving a man like Mr. Le Roy mostly means ruin and destruction to a poor girl like you. If you stay, they will be sure to find you out, and then what is to become of you? These proud Le Roys will be fit to kill you for deceiving them so. You had better go and fling yourself into the river yonder than waste your heart on Mr. St. Leon Le Roy."

Laurel sprung to her feet, her small hands clinched, her dark eyes suddenly blazing.

"Hush!" she cried. "How dare you accuse me of loving St. Leon Le Roy? It is false. I never dreamed of such a folly. I will not have you talk so to me, Clarice! Is there no reason I should want to stay but that I cared for him? Do I not love his grand, beautiful home? Do I not love the stately lady who has been so kind to me? I would rather be Mrs. Le Roy's servant than go away!" ended beautiful Laurel, wildly.

"She would not have you for her servant even, if once she found out the truth about you," argued sensible Clarice. "Miss Vane, I do not know what to think of this sudden fancy of yours. What would Miss Beatrix—I mean Mrs. Wentworth, say if she could hear you?"

"Clarice, I have served her ends and she can have no right to reproach me if I take my own way now," said the girl. "And indeed it is far better for me not to go. Mr. Wentworth is a poor man. Why should I burden him with my support? They will do better without me. Oh, Clarice, dear, kind Clarice," she flung herself suddenly on her knees before the perplexed maid and grasped her dress imploringly, "let me have my way in this! Go to Mrs. Wentworth and leave me here!"

Beg her not to betray the conspiracy yet. Tell her to be kind to me, to let me stay as long as I can before they find me out in my wickedness!"

"And then," said Clarice, gravely, "what will you do after that?"

"Then—the deluge," Laurel answered, recklessly.

They spent an hour in heated argument. Laurel was desperately resolved not to leave Eden, if possible. Her tears, her prayers, conquered Clarice's better judgment. The end of it all was, that Clarice gave in to her plans, and promised to influence Beatrix Wentworth to withhold her promised letters of confession to the Gordons and the Le Roys.

"But I must say one thing, Miss Vane, in spite of your anger," said the maid, sturdily. "If you have laid a plan to marry the master of Eden, I will betray you if it is at the front of the altar. You must not dare carry the farce that far! You are beautiful and young; but you are no mate for the proud, rich master of Eden. If you married him and he found out the cheat afterward, he would make you the most wretched woman under the sun!"

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Afterward, Laurel recalled the maid's words as if they had been some fateful prophecy, instead of the wise utterance of a clear-headed woman.

"You need not threaten me, Clarice," she said, with girlish dignity. "I have laid no plans—not one. I have not thought about the future. I only could not bear to go away. I know Mr. Le Roy could never think of me—*that way!* I—have never even dreamed of it. Do not judge me so harshly, Clarice. Remember how young I am. Is it strange that I should love the only happy home I ever had?"

Clarice could not resist her beauty, her pleadings, her distress. She smoothed the golden hair tenderly, and kissed the white hands, and admitted that she was sorry for Laurel Vane. But she said to herself, all the same, that she was acting wrong in leaving the girl at Eden in her borrowed plumes. Harm would come of it—harm to the beautiful, willful creature who was so blindly rushing upon her fate.

That evening Laurel told Mrs. Le Roy that Clarice had received an offer to accompany a lady to Europe, and that the girl had determined to accept it, and would leave her on the next day to go to New York.

"You shall have my own maid to help you every day until you find a new one," said Mrs. Le Roy, cordially: and Laurel, thanking her, said that she did not require the services of a maid very much, and she would not engage another until she returned to New York.

Clarice Wells went away the next morning full of joy at the prospect before her, but regretful at leaving Laurel. She fancied that the girl would fare but ill at the hands of the Le Roys when they found her out.

Laurel sent the beautiful pearls, Mrs. Gordon's gift, to Beatrix Wentworth with her love and best wishes.

The maid declined to take the new hats and dresses to her mistress.

"You will need them if you are going to keep up this masquerade," she said. "And when they turn you adrift upon the world you can sell them for money to buy food and shelter."

She went away, and in the new loneliness that fell upon her, Laurel Vane began to realize dimly to what imminent perils she had willfully committed herself.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

Clarice had barely gone a week, when one evening Mrs. Le Roy came sailing into the dressing-room, whither Laurel had gone to dress for dinner, but was dreaming instead at the open window.

"My dear, we have company from New York," she said, rather abruptly.

Laurel started and turned a pale, frightened face toward the lady.

"New York," she faltered, tremblingly, with her heart on her lips.

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A moment ago she had been careless, almost light hearted, as she leaned from the window and watched the shadows of twilight falling on the river and the beautiful grounds. She had inhaled the flower-scented air with something like delight. She had been murmuring to herself some pretty lines of Jean Ingelow's:

"I leaned out of window, I smelt the white clover,  
Dark, dark was the garden, I saw not the gate;  
Now, if there be footsteps, he comes, my one lover—  
Hush, nightingale, hush! O, sweet nightingale, wait  
Till I listen and hear  
If a step draweth near,  
For my love he is late."

The murmured words of the love-song had died on the sweet lips now. They were white with fear

as she turned to Mrs. Le Roy.

"My child, you need not look so startled," she laughed. "My guests will not eat you."

Then Laurel knew that she had almost betrayed herself. She rallied her sinking spirits with a great effort of will.

"I was rather startled. When you said New York I thought of so many whom I knew," she said, apologetically. "Is it any one who—knows me, Mrs. Le Roy?" she asked, quivering with secret fear.

"No, my dear; but it is a lady who moves in the highest circles of fashionable society in New York—an old friend of mine and St. Leon's—a beautiful young widow she is now. She ran down quite informally upon us to bring a friend—a titled foreigner—to see our beautiful Eden." Laurel began to take heart again now. She listened with a smile, while the lady continued: "You will not take it amiss in your mother's old friend, Beatrix, if I suggest that you make your dinner toilet more elaborate than usual? You are always lovely, dear"—seeing the pale cheeks crimson suddenly—"in the simplest things you wear; but, to do honor to our guests and justice to your own rare beauty, I want you to look your loveliest to-night. I want to help you select a robe from among the new ones your mother sent—may I, dear?" with a coaxing smile.

"They do not fit—they are all too large, I think," faltered Laurel.

"I will send my maid. She can make the necessary alterations in a few minutes. I am waiting, dear, to help you select your robe, if you will allow me," said Mrs. Le Roy, with gentle persistence.

And Laurel had to yield.

They looked through the dresses and selected one of white nun's-veiling, satin and Spanish lace—simple enough for a young girl, yet exquisitely elaborate and becoming.

"If you will wear this with the beautiful pearls your mother sent, you will be simply peerless," said Mrs. Le Roy.

Laurel could not confess that she had sent the pearls away. When Mrs. Le Roy was gone, and the maid was altering the dinner-dress, she slipped out and gathered her hands full of deep scarlet jacqueminot roses.

"Will not these roses look well with the white dress?" she asked the stylish French maid, rather timidly.

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"Superb!" pronounced mademoiselle, with enthusiasm.

And when the dress was on, and the great clusters of scarlet roses gleamed against the white breast, and in the rippling curls of burnished gold, the maid could not repress an exclamation of delight. Nothing could have been lovelier than the dark-eyed, golden-haired girl in the white dress with the fragrant scarlet roses. Mademoiselle did not know that the girl hated herself with a passionate contempt as she looked down at her beautiful, borrowed plumage.

"Fine feathers make fine birds," she said to herself, bitterly, as she went down the stairs to the brilliantly lighted drawing-room, holding her small head high to hide the tremor at her heart.

She opened the door and entered. Mrs. Le Roy was there talking to a handsome young man. Beyond them she saw St. Leon with his dark head bent over a beautiful woman at the piano. Her white, jeweled hands flew swiftly over the pearl keys, and she was singing to him in a high, clear soprano voice:

"Oh, my lost love, and my own, own love,  
And my love who loved me so!"

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## CHAPTER XIX.

Laurel drew back on the threshold, fearful of interrupting the singer, but Mrs. Le Roy had already perceived her, and came forward with considerable *empressement* to draw her into the room and introduce her.

"Miss Gordon, Count Fitz John," she said, and with a gasp as if some one had thrown cold water over her, the false Beatrix Gordon found herself bowing to a real, live French count.

Her trepidation passed away in a moment. The count was not at all imposing—a good-looking young fellow enough, but St. Leon Le Roy overtopped him by head and shoulders in size and manly beauty. Laurel sat down, shyly conscious of his palpable admiration, and when the song had come to an end she was presented to the singer.

A shimmer of azure silk, a gleam of jewels, a waft of overpowering perfume, and Laurel dared raise her eyes to the beautiful blonde face with its turquoise blue eyes, its pink cheeks, and smiling lips, a halo of pale golden hair framing it all and lending an air of infantile innocence to its beauty. She looked very young, and she was smaller than Laurel—a wax doll, dainty and diminutive, and with a smile as sweet and inane. She did not look like a widow. It seemed strange to call her *Mrs. Merivale*.

The blue eyes, for all their infantile softness, gave Laurel a piercing take-you-in-at-a-glance look,

as they touched each other's hands.

"A dark-eyed blonde—labeled dangerous!" said Mrs. Merivale to herself enviously, and feeling for a moment doubtful over the effect of her own elaborate costume as compared with this pure white robe with its vivid garniture of roses.

But, in a moment, her natural vanity reasserted itself. She concluded to be gracious.

"I am so glad to know you, Miss Gordon. I have heard of you in New York, although rumor did not credit you with half the charms I find you in actual possession of," she twittered, sweetly. "Will you come to the piano and play for us? I am so fond of music?"

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"I do not play," Laurel answered, feeling the warm color flood her cheeks under the lady's astonished gaze.

"Not play! Why, surely—" began Mrs. Merivale, but to Laurel's intense relief dinner was announced, and she was spared the expression of the lady's surprise at her ignorance.

Yet she looked at the pearl keys longingly as she swept past the grand piano on the count's arm. She had a great passionate love for the divine art of music, and a great grief filled her soul at the thought that her hands had no power to wake the soul of harmony slumbering in those silent keys.

"Poor papa! I wish that he had taught me more of music and less of languages," she thought, regretfully.

Yet, when at dinner they talked in the French language out of compliment to the polite count, she was glad that she could hold her own among them. She felt rather than saw, St. Leon's surprise, and Mrs. Merivale's dismay.

"So she can speak French like a native, although she cannot play—curious!" said the latter to herself, with a feeling of vexation, for she had started the ball of French conversation with a distinct view to Miss Gordon's discomfiture.

Laurel had never seen Mr. Le Roy so brilliant as he was this evening. It seemed that he had never exerted himself for her. He was affable, courteous, fascinating to his visitors, especially so to the lady. He had softly spoken words for her winning smiles that Laurel had never dreamed could curve those sternly set lips. A pang of bitterness pierced the sensitive heart of the lovely young impostor.

"He has never thought Beatrix Gordon worthy of his kind words and smiles," she thought.

He did not think so now it seemed. He did not speak to her, seldom looked at her. His words and looks were lavished on the fair, smiling widow who gave herself up to the flirtation with eager, absorbing interest. The count paid great attention to Laurel, and she tried to look interested in his conversation, but she was glad when the dinner was ended and the ladies passed from the room, leaving the gentlemen to finish their wine.

Mrs. Merivale went to the low window and looked out upon the moonlit balcony.

"How lovely it is!" she cried. "Will you come out, Mrs. Le Roy?—you and Miss Gordon?"

"Beatrix may go—I am afraid of the night air," Mrs. Le Roy responded, settling herself in an easy-chair.

"Will you come, Miss Gordon?" asked the fair widow. "It is too lovely a night to remain indoors," she added, sentimentally.

Laurel went out to her, and Mrs. Merivale drew her ringed hand lovingly through the girl's arm.

"Let us go out and gather some roses with the moonlight and dew upon them. They will be so sweet," she said, winningly. "And, please, will you call me Maud, and let me call you Beatrix? We are both too young to be ceremonious with each other."

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They went down into the graveled paths where the September moonlight shone clear and white, and then Maud Merivale seemed to forget all about the roses.

"*Ma chère*, I am dying to know how you like the count!" she cried.

"He is very nice, I suppose," said Laurel, vaguely, her thoughts elsewhere.

"Very nice'—oh, dear, what faint praise for my gallant adorer!" laughed the lady. "Why, my dear Beatrix, all the girls in New York vote him a love, a darling, an Adonis, and above all, a splendid catch! They are all jealous of me! Any one of them could willingly cut my ears off for having taken him captive!"

"Then you are to marry him?" said innocent Laurel, taking a vague pleasure in the thought as suggested by the lady's words.

"*Cela depend*. I can marry him if I choose," laughed the lady. "You must have observed how devoted he is."

Laurel had *not* observed it; but she wisely said nothing.

Maud Merivale shook her golden frizzes in the moonlight.

"I shall not marry him. It is useless his breaking his heart over me," she said. "I am too true to my old love."

"Your dead husband," Laurel said, gently.

"Pshaw, Beatrix"—impatiently—"what are you talking of? Do you not know that Mr. Merivale was an old man? It was not at all a love match: it was because he was rich."

"Pardon," Laurel murmured, faintly, and she recalled to herself, as she often did, Clarice's favorite song of "Dollars and Dimes."

"It is all right. The old man died soon, and left me a fortune," said the young widow, heartlessly. "But as for loving him, or having any sentimental *tendresse* over his memory—pshaw, I am not such a little simpleton as that, my dear! no one could expect it," plaintively. "Beatrix," this with startling suddenness—"tell me what do you think of your host—of St. Leon Le Roy?"

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## CHAPTER XX.

The change of conversation was so sudden that Laurel started and shivered uncomfortably.

"Are you cold, my dear?" asked Maud Merivale.

"I felt chilly for a moment," Laurel answered. "It does not matter. You were saying—"

"I asked you what you thought of St. Leon Le Roy, Beatrix. Is he not"—enthusiastically—"grand, handsome, noble—a very king among men?"

Little thrills of icy coldness shot along Laurel's tingling nerves. She remembered his cold, proud bearing to her, as contrasted with his winning and tender demeanor to Maud Merivale that evening. She answered with impulsive bitterness:

"He may be all that to you, Mrs. Merivale, but to me he has always seemed cold, hard, stern!"

"Poor St. Leon!—ah! I know who warped his generous nature so," sighed the lady. "Beatrix, I am so fond of you I have a mind to tell you my story—mine and St. Leon's." [Pg 46]

They paced back and forth in the fine, clear moonlight, their rich robes shining in the night: the fragrance of flowers all about them; the sound of the river in their ears. A hand of ice seemed to clutch Laurel's heart in its fierce grasp. She could find no words in which to answer.

"You have heard that we were old friends, St. Leon and I—they have surely told you that, dear," went on Maud Merivale's sweet, insidious voice. "Beatrix, in the olden times, we were more than that—we were lovers."

"Lovers!" echoed Laurel's low, sad voice.

"We were lovers," repeated Mrs. Merivale, in a tone of triumph. "But we were both very young, and—well, old Midas Merivale was even richer than St. Leon. My parents were poor, and so they parted me from my young lover and sold me to that old man for his sordid gold."

There was a plaintive quiver in the cooing voice, and Laurel's heart suddenly went out to the lovely victim in tender sympathy.

"After my marriage I did not see St. Leon for years," continued the sweet tones. "But they told me he had changed—that he had grown hard, cynical, cold—that he cared nothing for women save to rail at them. But I am free at last—and you see for yourself that he unbends to me as to none other. The old love still burns in his heart. I shall win him back, Beatrix, and this time no one shall come between us!"

"Maud," called a strong, sweet voice, coming down the marble steps.

"I am here, St. Leon," she answered back, gladly. "This pretty Beatrix here promised me some roses all sweet with moonlight and dew, but she has not given me one. You shall give them to me, St. Leon."

He came out to them, his handsome dark head bare in the moonlight, a smile in his eyes and on his lips—subtly sweet and dangerous as he sometimes willed it to be.

"Miss Gordon, will you go into the house with the count and my mother?" he said, looking straight into the girl's dark eyes. "I will find the roses 'all sweet with moonlight and dew.'"

Laurel bowed silently and turned away. She did not turn her head, but she knew that the widow had taken St. Leon's arm and was walking across the velvety greensward with him. The echo of firm tones and happy laughter floated back to her.

She did not go back to the count and Mrs. Le Roy as she had been bidden at once. She sat down at the foot of the marble steps and laid her hot brow wearily down on the cold white stone.

"Their words hurt me here," she murmured, pressing her small hand on her beating heart. "But I cannot understand why it should be so. Why should their love pain me? I care nothing for either of them. They are nothing to me. But, oh! this terrible pain at my heart—what does it mean?"

The slight form shivered and trembled, the beautiful face was deathly white in the moonlight. She rested there silently a long time, looking down with sharpened mental vision into her own heart. [Pg 47]

And suddenly a moan of intense self-scorn and bitter despair trembled over the beautiful girlish lips.

"I have been willfully blind; I have not understood till now," she moaned. "But, by the flash of jealousy and grief, I have seen my heart. Clarice was right, and I spoke falsely when I denied her."



I love him—that haughty, handsome man, who has never given me one thought—who belongs to Maud Merivale. That is why I risked all to remain at Eden! Oh, God! how hard it is to read my own heart first by its jealousy and aching!"

And the night winds and the river echoed her faint, despairing moan.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

After a little she dragged herself up wearily, and went back to the drawing-room. The young count brightened visibly at her appearance. Mrs. Le Roy told her that she had stayed out too long in the night air and dew.

"You look as cold and white as the moonlight," she said.

Laurel made her some careless answer and sat down. Count Fitz John engaged her in conversation. He was delighted to find some one who could converse fairly in his native tongue, and he never wearied of gazing on her rare type of beauty, and her tasteful dress that appealed so forcibly to his artistic eye. He admired her, perhaps, all the more that she piqued him a little by her quietness and girlish dignity. She was not flattered by his notice as other girls were. On the contrary, if he had not been rather self-conceited, he must have seen that she was decidedly bored.

St. Leon and his fair guest came in almost an hour later. Laurel did not look up at their entrance, though she felt her cheeks growing hot, with the bitter wonder that was in her mind.

Did St. Leon Le Roy suspect that she cared for him? Had he fathomed the secret of her heart before she really understood it herself? Was that the secret of his coldness, his almost harshness to her? Had he used

"This rough discourtesy  
To break or blunt her passion?"

The hot color flashed into her sensitive face. She tried not to hear his clear, firm voice, as he talked to Mrs. Merivale. To drown those tones, she was obliged to listen attentively to the count, and to talk more herself. She roused herself to almost vivacity. She *would* be gay. No one should guess how her heart was bleeding. She succeeded so well in her efforts that the Frenchman was delighted. He thought that he had at last begun to make an impression on the lovely girl, and Laurel, never glancing toward the others did not know with what a frowning brow St. Leon watched her apparent coqueries.

But the interminable evening was over at last. Laurel could never have told how she got through it, but at last they had all gone to their rooms, and Laurel stood before the long glittering mirror in her dressing-room gazing with sad eyes and trembling lips at the face reflected there as at a new creature—a girl who for three months had been living a strange unconscious love-dream, and who had first found out that she had a heart by its bitter aching.

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"Why did she love him? Curious fool, be still;  
Is human love the growth of human will?"

Self-scorn and self-pity struggled together in her heart. She felt with a great throb of bitter shame that she had given her love unsought, unvalued, and to another woman's lover. Maud Merivale's words rang in her ears:

"I shall win him back, and this time no one shall come between us."

"He belongs to Maud Merivale. What matter? He never could have been mine," she said, to the white-faced, dark-eyed girl gazing back at her from the mirror with the red roses dying on her breast.

Yesterday she had been reading in a book in the library some pretty verses written over just such a mad and foolish love as this of hers. A fancy seized her to read them again in the light of this new revelation that had flashed upon her heart.

"I will slip down to the library and bring the book," she said, gliding out into the hall and down the broad stairway, shrinkingly, like a little white ghost.

The library was deserted, but the shaded reading-lamp still burned over the center-table with its litter of books and magazines.

The marble busts and statuettes against the book-lined walls looked grimly down upon her, this fair, golden-haired girl with that look of tragic sorrow on her pale face.

"*He* has been here," she murmured, softly, noting the faint fragrance of cigar smoke that pervaded the air.

She sat down in the great cushioned reading-chair and then she saw another token of his presence—a knot of golden pansies he had worn in his button-hole that evening, and which now lay carelessly on the floor at her feet. She would never have guessed that he had thrown them there in passionate disdain because Maud Merivale's hand had pinned them on his breast.

Laurel picked up the poor dying flowers and held them tenderly.

"You have been near the rose," she murmured, and pressed them to her lips in sudden, passionate love and sorrow. She could not help it. They spoke to her so plainly of the proud man who had won her heart all unwittingly. They made her think of the princely form, the dark, luring, splendid face, the proud, cynical, dark eyes, the curling lips like that once or twice only she had seen curved into a beautiful smile, subtly sweet and dangerous, which women had worshiped blindly, but which only shone upon them to betray their hopes to ruin.

She held the flowers, kissed them again and again, then threw them far from her in a sudden revulsion of feeling bordering on supreme self-contempt.

"Ah, if I could throw my hopeless passion from me thus lightly," she sighed.

She found the book she wished, and, tempted by the deep silence and quiet of the room, decided to remain awhile at least. With her fair head resting on her arm she began to read aloud softly, after an old habit of hers:

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"You walk the sunny side of fate,  
The wise world smiles and calls you great.  
The golden fruitage of success  
Drops at your feet in plenteousness;  
And you have blessings manifold;  
Renown and power and friends and gold,  
They build a wall between us twain  
That may not be thrown down again.  
Alas! for I the long time through  
Have loved you better than you knew."

Suddenly a sweet, chilly breath of night air blew over her. She looked up and saw St. Leon Le Roy parting the heavy curtains of silk and lace at the bay-window behind which he had been quietly sitting smoking a cigar.

Bewildered, startled, Laurel threw down her book and sprung up in ignominious flight.

The master of Eden coolly caught her hands and forced her back into her seat.

"Why need you always fly from me as though I were an ogre?" he said, plaintively. "I shall not eat you, child, tempted as I might be to do so."

"I—I thought myself alone," she stammered, crimsoning under his mocking raillery.

"There is no harm done," he answered, drawing up a chair in front of her and gazing at her with the same slow, sweet smile he had worn when he bade her return to his mother and the count that evening. "I was smoking at the window when you first came in, and I thought at first I would be still and not disturb you, thinking you would go in a moment. But you stayed, and—I changed my mind."

Fancying some covert meaning in his words, she answered, quickly:

"But it is late, and indeed I must be going upstairs now."

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## CHAPTER XXII.

St. Leon glanced at his watch.

"No, it is not late—at least, not midnight. Surely you can spare me a few minutes, Miss Gordon. I wish very much to speak to you," he said, almost gravely.

"I cannot imagine why you should wish to speak to me," she began, tremulously.

"Cannot you?" laughing. "Well, suppose I have a mind to lecture you on your frivolity, Miss Gordon? Do you know, I never dreamed what an egregious flirt you were until I saw you bringing the whole battery of your charms to bear on that fascinated Frenchman this evening? Why have you never condescended to me likewise?"

"I deny the imputation. I am not a flirt," she answered, indignantly.

"Then you were in earnest—worse still!" he said, in that light, mocking tone, with his piercing eyes on her burning face. "Beatrice—pardon, Miss Gordon—what would Cyril Wentworth say to that?"

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"Nothing! It is no more concern of his," she flashed out, passionately unconscious of the sudden joy that flashed into his eyes.

"Do you mean that you have broken with Wentworth?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she answered, coldly.

He regarded her suspiciously.

"Do you know that he is gone away?" he asked, doubtfully.

"To Europe—yes, but I do not care!" she answered, out of the recklessness of her despair.

"Do you mean that you love him no longer—that it was a mere child-fancy that absence has

cured?" St. Leon asked her, anxiously. She gave him a swift, half-angry glance from her dark eyes.

"I do not know why you should presume to question me so," she said, with a little flash of pride. "But I will answer you, Mr. Le Roy. Yes, it was a mere childish fancy, and I am effectually cured of it. I know now that I never loved Cyril Wentworth in my life."

He bowed his handsome head in graceful acknowledgment.

"Your frankness emboldens me to ask another confidence," he said. "Miss Gordon, tell me the story Mrs. Merivale poured into your sympathetic ear this evening."

She drew back, indignant and amazed.

"Would you ask me to betray a woman's sacred confidence?" she cried.

He laughed aloud—harshly, sneeringly.

"Do you call *that* confidence which is poured into every stranger's ear? That figment of Maud Merivale's crafty brain?" he cried. "Tell me the pretty fiction she gave you, Miss Gordon, and then you shall hear my side of the story."

"If you wish me to congratulate you, Mr. Le Roy, I will do so now without waiting to hear more," she said, desperately, eager to escape this painful interview.

He caught her hand as she half arose, and gently forced her back to her seat.

"Do not leave me yet," he said. "Pshaw! I know her pitiful stereotyped story! We were lovers once and her parents parted us and sold her to an old man because he was richer than I! Is not that the amount of the pretty idyl, Miss Gordon?"

"Yes," she answered, wonderingly.

"I thought so—I have heard it often before. Now hear my side of the story, child. We were lovers in our young days—that is true. You would not believe that Maud is thirty, would you, Miss Gordon? My mother thought me too young to marry then, and besides, she did not wholly approve of my choice. The end justified her. We postponed the consummation of our bliss until I should come of age. Maud grew impatient. Old Midas Merivale met her, and—pardon the wretched slang, Miss Gordon—she 'went for him' and threw me over! To-night," he resumed, after a moment's pause, "she threw prudence and delicacy to the winds, begging me to forgive her and to take her back to my heart—swore that she had never ceased to love me. Can you guess what answer I made her?"

"No," she faltered, thrilling with interest.

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"I told her that since her sin I had scorned all women for her sake—*her* most of all! I told her that never until now had I met a woman who redeemed the sex in my eyes—a child woman so fair, so innocent, so frank and truthful, that falsehood could not breathe the same air with her—one to whom I gave the strong, passionate love of a man combined with the reverence due to an angel."

He stretched out his arms to her yearningly, his face transfigured with his mighty love.

"Beatrix, I am twice as old as you are, but I love you to madness! I have hated Cyril Wentworth in my bitter jealousy, but that is all past. Thank God, you love him no longer—you are free! Can you love *me*, Beatrix? Will you be my wife?"

Laurel Vane almost reeled with the suddenness of this perfect joy that had come upon her. She was face to face with the great temptation of her life, but, oh, how powerless, through her passionate love, to fight against it!

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## CHAPTER XXIII.

Deep emotion overpowered Laurel's speech for a moment. Her lips parted as if to speak, but closed again without a sound. Her fair head drooped like a beautiful flower too heavily laden with dew. It had come upon her like a great shock that St. Leon Le Roy loved her—loved her, the false Beatrix Gordon, the perjured girl living a deliberate lie beneath his roof. She called it by its worst name to herself, even though she flinched from it, for she had, as Clarice Wells said of her, a habit of calling things by their right names. To her a "spade" was a "spade." She had the moral courage to recognize her sin, but this love had made her a coward. She could not confess the truth. For the sake of this man she had risked all. She could not put his love from her now. Yet his next words stabbed her with keenest pain.

"For the first time, Beatrix, I feel like thanking God for Maud's falsity, since it has left me free to win you, my true, angel-hearted girl!"

"True! angel-hearted—oh, my God!" she shuddered to herself, and a longing came over her to be all that he thought her, honest, innocent, true. Should she confess all, and trust to his great love to pity and pardon her?

She lifted her dark, wistful eyes to his glowing, eager face.

"If you had not loved me perhaps you would have forgiven the wrong Mrs. Merivale did you," she said, anxiously.

The stern lines she dreaded came around his lips again.

"I forgave her long ago—as long ago as my fancy for her died!" he said. "But I can never respect her, nor even like her again. She deceived me. I can never forget that! Women should be little lower than the angels, Beatrix.

"A perfect creature, nobly planned,  
To warn, to comfort, and command,  
And yet a spirit still and bright,  
With something of an angel's light."

Wordsworth's ideal is mine, Beatrix. I could never again love a woman who had deceived me. Once fallen from her lofty pedestal, the broken idol could never be restored again! [Pg 52]

He was unconsciously warning her, but he only frightened her. She said to herself that he would never forgive her if she told him at this late day how she had deceived him. And she could not do it. She would not risk it. She loved him too dearly. She would have his love while she could, whether it lasted for a year or a day.

"Why did you deceive her this evening?" she asked, gaining courage as she made her wild resolve. "You were so devoted and attentive she thought she had won you back."

His scornful laugh was not good to hear.

"That was my revenge," he said. "I fooled her to the top of her bent, while I laughed in my sleeve at her credulity. She should have known me better, yet she came down here with the deliberate intention of winning me back. She did not find St. Leon the boy who was blinded by her beauty, she found Le Roy, the man who saw through her shallow arts and despised her." She had no answer ready and he went on more slowly after a moment: "Shall I confess that I had another motive too, Beatrix? I longed to pique you if possible. Since you came to Eden you have been cold, shy, frightened of me always. I confess that I gave you room at first, but I soon became interested in you and would have repaired my error if you had let me. But you did not. You treated me with a distant, respectful civility, as if I had been as old as my mother. When Mrs. Merivale came I determined to show you that I was not too antiquated to admire fair women and to be admired by them. But you held your own so bravely, you flirted so charmingly with Count Fitz John that I was completely blinded and half maddened by your indifference. Ah, my darling," he bent toward her with a flash of triumphant love in his splendid eyes, "if you had not come in here to night, I should never have dreamed, never have known—"

"You heard—you saw?" she broke in, hot and red with bitter shame. "Oh, I could sooner have died!" hiding her burning face in her small hands.

"Hush, Beatrix." He drew the trembling hands away, put his arms around her tenderly, and pillowed the flushed face on his breast. "It was a happy chance, my love. Do not regret it for my sake. Do not think I spied upon your actions, darling. I did not mean to disturb you, only I could not forbear peeping through the curtains and feasting my eyes on your sweetness. So it came to pass that I heard and saw—that which made me the happiest of men!"

"You take it for granted that I—that you—" she began to remonstrate, incoherently, with a mutinous, trembling pout upon her sweet red lips.

"That you belong to me—that I may ask you for your love—since you have broken with Wentworth—yes," he answered, full of happy faith. "Is it not true, Beatrix, my beautiful, dark-eyed love? Will you not be my cherished little wife?"

And paler than the marble statue that glimmered coldly white in the shadowy corner yonder, she murmured:

"I will."

Full of boundless trust and passion he bent down and pressed a lingering, passionate kiss on the lips of the beautiful impostor. [Pg 53]

"God bless you, my little love," he said, huskily, and with deep *empressement*, "you shall never regret that sweet promise."

He meant to keep his word, but we mortals are so blind. The day came when she felt that all her life was one long regret!

"Oh, that word regret!  
There have been nights and morns when we have sighed  
'Let us alone, Regret! We are content  
To throw thee all our past, so thou wilt sleep  
For aye.' But it is patient, and it wakes!  
It hath not learned to cry itself to sleep,  
But plaineth on the bed that it is hard."

Dizzy with passionate love and happiness, she rested in his arms a moment, then drew herself shyly away.

"It grows late. Indeed, I must leave you now," she whispered.

"It is late and you are weary," he said, tenderly. "I must send you to your rest, my precious one, but for me I shall sit here all night rejoicing over my sweet, new happiness."

They had heard no step in the hall, but at that moment the door swung open and Mrs. Merivale appeared on the threshold in an exquisite dressing-gown, her loosened golden hair flying over her shoulders. She gazed in dismay for an instant, then started backward with a quick smile of scorn.

"Pardon! I could not sleep, and came for a book. I did not dream of interrupting such an interesting midnight *tête-à-tête*," she said, sneeringly.

St. Leon drew his arm gently around the slight form of his betrothed, an ominous gleam in his eyes.

"Congratulate us, Mrs. Merivale," he said, "Miss Gordon has promised to be my wife."

The snaky fire of hate flashed in greenish sparkles from the eyes of the disappointed woman.

"With all my heart. May you be as happy as you deserve," she answered, scornfully.

Then, turning to go, she bent swiftly toward Laurel Vane and whispered in her ear with the hissing tone of hate:

"You have triumphed over me—you have come between us, but do not forget that '*Who breaks—pays!*'"

"An omen," Laurel sighed to herself.

He was loath to let her go when the jealous, angry woman had disappeared. The pale, frightened face touched his heart. He made her tell him what Maud Merivale had hissed in her ear.

"A mere idle threat," he said. "She can do you no harm, Beatrix. You are too secure in your high position as Mr. Gordon's daughter and my promised wife for her hate to touch you. As the mistress of Eden you will be socially her superior, for old Midas Merivale made his millions in trade, and the Le Roys have inherited their wealth from several generations of blue-blooded ancestors. Indeed, we trace our origin from the French nobility."

Everything he told her only frightened her worse. She trembled at her presumption in entering this family which prided itself less on its great wealth than on its noble pedigree. She silently recalled some verses she had read that evening:

"I knew that every victory,  
But lifted you away from me;  
That every step of high emprise  
But left me lowlier in your eyes;  
I watched the distance as it grew,  
And loved you better than you knew!"

"He counts his ancestors back to the French nobility, while I do not know what my grandfather's name was," said Louis Vane's daughter to herself.

"Before you go, my darling," said St. Leon, suddenly, "there is one thing I should like to hear you say."

"Tell me what it is," she answered.

He took both her trembling hands in his and looked deep into her eyes with a piercing gaze that seemed to read her soul.

"Lift up your head, Beatrix, look straight into my eyes, and say, 'St. Leon, I love you.'"

Blushing "celestial, rosy red," she obeyed his fond command, and there was a depth of pathos and passion in her voice of which she was herself unconscious.

"St. Leon, I love you," she repeated from the depths of her adoring heart.

"My darling!" he caught her in his arms and strained her eagerly to his breast. "Forgive me for calling out your blushes so, but they are more lovely than your roses. Now good-night, my little love, but do not speak another word. Let those last sweet words live in my memory to-night."

He kissed her and put her gently from him, then stood at the door to watch the little white figure going lightly along the hall and up the wide polished stairway.

"Mine, mine, my little love!" he murmured, gladly. "How pleased and happy my mother will be!"

He went back into the room, threw himself down into a chair, and, true to his word, spent the remaining hours of the night in a happy vigil, dreaming over the sweet, new happiness which had come to him so strangely when his heart had been weighed down by despair.

And Laurel Vane! She kept a wakeful vigil, too. Her eyes were not so bright as they should have been next morning, her cheeks and lips were not so rosy, but her beauty was as marked as ever, and Count Fitz John was very loath to follow the angry, disappointed widow back to New York that day.

"I not only found an Eden but an Eve!" he said to Maud, rather disconsolately.

"You need not vex your heart over her, for she has found her Adam in St. Leon Le Roy," she answered, bitterly.

When they were gone, St. Leon sought his mother.

"Congratulate me," he said. "The desire of your heart will be granted. I am about to marry."

Her handsome, proud old face did not look as bright as he had expected.

"You have chosen Maud Merivale again?" she said, and then he understood the shadow on her face and the tone of regret in her voice. [Pg 55]

"You are still prejudiced against Maud!" he said, quietly.

"I have never forgiven her for the slight she put upon my son!" she answered, gravely.

Laurel's slim young figure went flitting past the open door at that moment. He called to her, drew the small hand through his arm, and led her up to his mother.

"Mother, here is your daughter," he said, with the brightest smile she had ever seen on his darkly handsome face.

"And Cyril Wentworth?" she asked, blissful, but bewildered.

"I have never loved him. It was only fancy. I have broken with him forever!" answered the girl.

"Thank God!" she cried, drawing her new daughter into her arms and kissing her fondly; while she added to St. Leon, gladly: "I am so glad it is our sweet little Beatrix, and not that odious Maud Merivale!"

And that day she wrote a letter to Mrs. Gordon, telling her how cleverly their plot had succeeded, and that St. Leon had taken Cyril Wentworth's place in her daughter's heart.

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## CHAPTER XXIV.

"Woed and married and a'." How swiftly it all had followed upon Laurel Vane's coming to Eden!

In June she had come to the Le Roys, a trembling, frightened, innocent little impostor, lending herself to a fraud for Beatrix Gordon's sake. From a most unwelcome intruder, whom they had received with secret disfavor, she had come to be the light of their eyes and their hearts. To-day—a fair, ripe day in October, with the "flying gold of the ruined woodlands driving through the air"—she clung to St. Leon Le Roy's arm, his worshiped bride, happy, with a strange, delirious happiness, in spite of the sword that ever hung suspended by a hair above her head—the sword that must surely fall some day, and cause her destruction.

She was dizzy with the whirl of events that had brought about this dazzling consummation.

In the first place, Mr. Le Roy had written to Mr. Gordon, announcing his engagement to his daughter, and pleading for an early marriage.

The publisher had replied, on the part of himself and wife, delightedly sanctioning their darling's betrothal to Mr. Le Roy, and permitting Beatrix to consult her own wishes in naming the day. They wished only to make their darling happy, they said; and she should, therefore, choose the earliest day that pleased her. Mrs. Gordon wrote that she would soon come home to superintend the preparation of the bridal *trousseau*.

Laurel was filled with dismay at the latter information. St. Leon, noting every change of the fair young face with a lover's eye, was quick to see the shadow.

"What is it, my darling?" he asked.

"We must postpone the wedding a long, long time," she said. "Mamma must not curtail her Southern trip and lose the benefit she is deriving from it. We must wait." [Pg 56]

She felt like a hypocrite as she said it, but she was rendered desperate by her fears. She knew that, with Mrs. Gordon's coming, all was at an end, and she longed desperately to ward off the evil hour. She was so wildly, deliriously happy now, she would stave off the hour of reckoning as long as she could. Just to remain at Eden as long as she could was all that she asked. It always seemed to her quite impossible that she should ever become St. Leon Le Roy's wife. The blow would fall before then. She felt that she was only taking her pleasure like a butterfly in the sun, and that the nipping blasts of winter would soon lop off her gilded wings and leave her, crushed and trampled, beneath the scorner's heel.

Those joys that we hold by a frail, slight tenure we always prize the most. This love that she was fated one day to lose had become a part of Laurel Vane's life. She said to herself that, when she lost it she would die.

It was a mad love that she gave her noble, princely looking lover. She would have made any sacrifice for him except to tell him that she had deceived him. She would have died for him if need be, but death would have been easier than confessing her strange sin to him.

St. Leon chafed sorely at the idea of waiting so long to claim his bonny bride. They had talked of a bridal tour to Europe, and Laurel had betrayed the most eager delight at the idea. The tour of Europe had not the attraction of novelty to him. He had made it several times, but he longed to gratify the girl's wish; he was so sure that he would make her happy he could not bear to wait. And yet he was not selfish enough to wish to hasten Mrs. Gordon's return at the hazard of her health.

His mother agreed with him that it was unfortunate his having to wait. She was very anxious to see him married to Beatrix Gordon, and she thought the autumn a pleasant time for crossing the

ocean.

If they could only be married in October, how pleasant it would be, but then the *trousseau*—it would take an endless time for that.

St. Leon displayed all a man's impatience under the circumstances.

"A fig for the *trousseau*! What could be prettier than Beatrix's white dresses that she wore every day? But if she had to have no end of new things, why couldn't they get them when they went to Paris? Worth was the only man who could make them, anyhow. Given a traveling-dress to cross the 'herring pond' in, and she might have a hundred new dresses if she liked, once they landed in France. Must a man wait months and months for his happiness on account of some paltry dresses?"

Mrs. Le Roy, in her anxiety for the marriage, quite agreed with him in his tersely expressed views. If Mrs. Gordon came home she would order her daughter's dresses from Paris. How much easier for Beatrix to get them herself while abroad!

She wrote to Mrs. Gordon and suggested the idea. Moreover, she hinted broadly her fears that Beatrix, if let alone so long, might change her mind—might return to the old love—no one could say when Cyril Wentworth would return to America, nor what effect his return might have on his sweetheart. Mrs. Le Roy thought the wisest plan, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, would be for the Gordons to continue their Southern tour, and let St. Leon marry Beatrix quietly, without any fuss or ceremony, and take her abroad.

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That clever hint about Cyril Wentworth had the intended effect on the nervous invalid. All her old fears of Cyril Wentworth were reawakened. A longing desire took possession of her to have her daughter married off safely out of the fortune-hunter's reach. In her sudden anxiety she would have had St. Leon and Beatrix married that moment by telegraph if possible. She infected her husband with all her own fears, and both concurred in the opinion of Mrs. Le Roy that delays were dangerous.

So a letter went hastily back to Eden full of good tidings to the dwellers there.

The Gordons approved and even advocated Mrs. Le Roy's plan. They wrote to their daughter, and recommended her to shorten the term of her lover's probation, regretting that the state of her mother's health made it desirable for her to remain where she was yet awhile longer. The letter was filled with such warm, parental love and advice that Laurel involuntarily wept over it. A generous check for her Parisian *trousseau* was inclosed. This the young girl put carefully away.

"I shall never use it," she said. "Gold could not tempt me to sin. It is love that has made me bad and wicked, but I cannot draw back now. I shall marry St. Leon Le Roy. It is fate."

So, following that fate, she went recklessly on in her strange career. Three weeks later she was no longer Laurel Vane, she was Laurel Le Roy, almost forgetting in her wild happiness her enemy's threat, "*Who breaks—pays!*"

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## CHAPTER XXV.

Days came in which Laurel almost forgot the long, dark, threatening shadow that lay always just ahead of her.

They were crossing the wide Atlantic Ocean, and every one said that there never had been finer weather or a pleasanter trip. They had no rough winds the whole voyage. The calm, sunny blue sky hung over an ocean as beautifully blue and almost as calm. The foamy white caps of the waves were almost as fleecy and pure as the snowy little clouds that sailed through the sky. The beautiful shining-winged sea-birds were a source of beauty and delight to every one. Every day was warm and sunny, every night was moonlighted and balmy. No one had expected such perfect weather in October.

Forever after those two weeks remained in Laurel's memory like a beautiful dream, fadeless and ineffaceable.

For that little time she was perfectly secure. She knew no one on the steamer, no one knew her. Her husband was perfectly devoted to her as she was to him. They spent long, happy days together on deck, never weary of each other's society. They talked to each other by moonlight, their talk often drifting into poetry, which is the most natural language of love. They made some acquaintances, but they did not seek other society. They were all in all to each other. The girl-wife could not find it in her heart to repent of what she had done. It appeared to her that she had been made for him, and he for her, judging by their mutual love.

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Certainly a change for the better had been effected in St. Leon Le Roy. His dark eyes were no longer cold and cynical, but beamed with love and happiness. The mocking smile no longer curled his lips. They were sweet and gentle. His voice rang with tenderness instead of sarcasm. His hatred and distrust for all women because Maud Merivale had deceived him was gradually dying out. He believed that his bride was an angel. When the awakening came, it was all the more bitter because he had believed in her so truly.

Laurel was as lovely as a dream in those honeymoon days. Her face glowed with happiness, her dark eyes lost their somber, brooding shadow, and sparkled like stars.

The passengers said that Mr. Le Roy's young bride was a perfect beauty. When she walked on deck in her soft, fine, white cashmere dresses, with a crimson scarf about her shoulders, diamonds blazing in her small, shell-like ears, and her splendid burnished golden hair flying like a banner of light on the gentle breeze, no one could keep from looking at her, no one could keep from envying St. Leon Le Roy the possession of so much beauty, and sweetness, and love.

Laurel had never known that she was beautiful until St. Leon told her so. It was a new delight to her. Some faint hope came to her that by that beauty she might hold his heart, even when he found her out—even when he knew her at her worst—an impostor who had masqueraded under a false name, and so won him. She had read that "beauty is lord of love," and she prayed that it might prove so to her in her dark hour—that hour always just a little ahead of her, when she should moan:

"So tired, so tired, my heart and I!  
Though now none takes me on his arm  
To fold me close and kiss me warm  
Till each quick breath end in a sigh  
Of happy languor. Now alone,  
We lean upon some graveyard stone,  
Uncheered, unloved, my heart and I."

She would not think of that nearing future much. She gave herself up to the delights of the present. She was the most fondly worshiped wife in the world. When they went to Paris, he loaded her with costly gifts, splendid dresses, priceless jewels.

"I do not know how I shall ever be able to wear all of these splendid things; they are too fine for me," she said to him, almost afraid of herself in the midst of this splendid paraphernalia.

"Nothing is too costly or too fine for you, my little love," he answered, taking her in his arms and kissing the beautiful face over and over. "You will need all these things when you go into society. When we go home, we will spend our winters in New York, and the women in society there dress like queens. I shall want you to be the finest of them all, as you are decidedly the most beautiful."

He wondered why the fair face grew so pale, why his young wife shivered in his arms, and drooped her eyes from his.

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"I hope it will be a long time before we return to New York," she said, almost petulantly. "I like Europe better than America."

"You are a most disloyal subject of the United States," he laughed: "but you shall stay as long as you wish, my darling."

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

When they went to England, Laurel wondered a little tearfully if they should meet the Wentworths. She knew that they were in London, and the thought of coming upon them was not pleasant. She did not think that Beatrix Wentworth would approve of what she had done, and she recalled Clarice Wells' threat with an uncontrollable shudder. It had been so vivid.

"I would betray you even in front of the altar!" had said the maid.

Decidedly the thought of stumbling upon the Wentworths was not pleasant.

"But then," said the trembling young bride to herself, "there was no likelihood that they would do so. London was a great wide city. They might stay there for years, and never stumble upon these people of whom her guilty conscience made her feel so horribly afraid."

Again, she remembered that Cyril Wentworth was here on business, she and her husband in quest of pleasure. Their ways lay far apart. There were no mutual aims and pursuits to bring them together. It was decidedly unlikely that they should meet.

But some one has cleverly said that "The most unlikely things always happen."

They had been in London several weeks, patiently "doing" all the wonders of that wonderful city, when one day Mr. Le Roy took his wife to a famous art gallery. She had developed a perfect passion for fine pictures and statues, and he knew that she would be charmed with the works of the old masters that were gathered in this famous gallery—the Titians, Murillos, Guidos, Raphaels—all the glorious men who, by brush or chisel, had handed down their names to an immortal fame.

It was a bright day in December. The sun was shining, for a wonder, in murky, foggy London, irradiating its usual "pea-soup" atmosphere. St. Leon was delighted that the sun shone so brightly. He knew that it would show the pictures to still greater advantage, and he liked for his darling to have all her pleasures at their best.

Looking at Laurel you would never have guessed that until a few months ago she had lived in cheap lodgings with her erratic father, and tended their poor rooms with her own little white hands. She looked as dainty and lovely as a little princess now, as she tripped along by the side of her handsome, stately husband. The day was cold, although the sun shone so brightly, and Laurel was wrapped in a long cloak of shining seal-skin, with a pretty cap of the same perched jauntily



on her head, its long brown ostrich plume drooping against her long golden curls, contrasting with their lovely tinge, which must have been a favorite shade with the old masters, for St. Leon observed that they had painted it on the heads of their most beautiful women.

"There is not a picture on the walls half so lovely as her living face," he said to himself, exultantly, looking at the fair flower-face with its full crimson lips, its oval outline, its wine dark eyes with such wealth of jetty lashes softly fringing them, and the soft, bright fringe of love-locks, shading the low, white brow. The splendid diamond solitaires in her rosy ears flashed and sparkled with every turn of the restless little head, and were wondrously becoming to her style. It was no wonder that St. Leon's eyes turned often from the changeless canvas to dwell in fondest admiration on the living face full of the glow and flash and sparkle of youthful beauty and happiness.

He told her that she was more beautiful than the pictured faces on the walls, and her eyes flashed with joy, and her face flushed rosily. She was so glad of the fairness God had given her, she never wearied of hearing about it. It was the link by which she hoped to hold her husband when he found out the truth about her.

She often asked herself anxiously which would be the stronger in that terrible hour—his love or his pride—but she could never answer her own question. She loved St. Leon, but she did not yet understand him.

They were standing in front of a seraphic-looking Madonna, when suddenly he touched her arm, and whispered in her ear:

"Some others are waiting to look at this, dear. Let us move on."

She turned her beautiful, happy face from the picture toward the group who had just come up to them—a young lady and gentleman with a trim maid following after, some rich, warm wraps over her arm. They were Cyril Wentworth, his wife, and her maid Clarice.

The beautiful smile froze on Laurel's lips as she met their startled, wondering gaze. She uttered a moan like one dying, and all in a moment fell senseless on the floor.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

More than once, since they came to England, Clarice Wells said, anxiously, to her mistress:

"I am afraid Miss Vane has laid her plans to marry Mr. Le Roy. Why else should she have wished to remain at Eden?"

But Beatrix, who was very fond of the lovely girl who had made such a sacrifice for her sake, would not believe it.

"She was a dear, good, honest child," she said. "I had hard work to persuade her to personate me for a little while. Her exaggerated notion of gratitude was all that tipped the scale in my favor, allowing a little for her romantic pity for two despairing lovers. I am sure she would not attempt an intrigue at her own risk."

"One risks a great deal for love's sake," said Clarice Wells. "You would know that by your experience, Mrs. Wentworth."

"But Laurel was not in love with Mr. Le Roy. She was afraid of him. She wrote me to that effect," objected pretty Beatrix, fixing her large blue eyes surprisedly on Clarice's sober face.

"I beg your pardon. That might have been the case at first, but it was not likely to last," said the maid, pursuing her argument with the freedom of a favorite. "I do not believe Miss Vane's antipathy lasted long. He was very handsome and fascinating—just the man to win the love of an innocent young girl! And he admired her, I am sure of that, Mrs. Wentworth. And believing her to be his equal in wealth and station, what was there to prevent their marrying if they loved each other?"

"You are very clever, Clarice, but I am afraid you are making mountains of mole-hills," Beatrix Wentworth answered, lightly. "How could they marry without papa and mamma's consent? Beatrix Gordon would have to return to New York and be married from her father's house. And how could little Laurel Vane, with her big black eyes and innocent soul, personate me to my own parents? Do you not see that your theory wouldn't hold water, Clarice, as Cyril would say in his lively way."

Clarice was silenced, but not convinced.

"Anyway, I wish I had not left her there," she said. "My conscience would be all the clearer. But, Mrs. Wentworth, don't you think that you should write to your parents now and confess what you have done, and beg them to forgive you for your naughty conspiracy and runaway marriage?"

Two crystal drops brimmed over in Mrs. Wentworth's blue eyes and splashed down upon her pink cheeks.

"Dear papa, dear mamma, it was naughty and wicked to desert them so," she said; "but they were too hard upon Cyril and me. I loved him so dearly. I could not bear it. But I loved them too; and although Cyril makes me so happy, my heart aches for the dear ones at home."

"And you will write to them? The plunge has to be made some time. As well now as ever," urged the maid.

"No, not now. What do you take me for, Clarice? Do you think I would betray sweet little Laurel, to whom I owe all my happiness?" cried Beatrix, indignantly.

"I beg your pardon for naming it. Of course, you know best, Mrs. Wentworth," replied discreet Clarice, dropping the subject.

They had discussed the matter several times, each retaining her own opinion of the matter on the well-known principle that

"A woman convinced against her will  
Is of the same opinion still."

Beatrix, like most adoring young wives, who confide all they know to their husbands, laid her grievance before Cyril.

The handsome, happy young Benedick humbly begged his wife's pardon for coinciding with Clarice's views rather than hers, but he could not be shaken from his first opinion that the romance of the conspiracy would culminate in the marriage of St. Leon Le Roy and Laurel Vane.

"It would be a delightful ending," he said, laughing at her horrified face.

"But I tell you it would not," she said, emphatically. "It would be just too dreadful for anything, and I will not believe it of sweet little Laurel Vane!"

"I hope she may justify your good opinion, my dear," said Cyril Wentworth, dryly, but kissing her fondly, and loving her all the more for her boundless faith in her fellow woman. [Pg 62]

But they dropped the subject then, and if any one speculated further on Laurel Vane's hopes and plans it passed in silence. Beatrix was too generous to believe evil of the innocent girl who had served her in her clever counterplot against her parents. She loved Laurel for all she had done for her. When the shock of the truth came upon her it was all the harder to bear because of the loving faith she had persistently cherished.

That bright December day Cyril went home to their neat, pretty lodgings and announced that he had a holiday.

"It is such a lovely day, I should like to take you out somewhere, darling," he said, smoothing the bright waves of her golden hair with caressing fingers. "You know it is not often that I have the chance to escort you anywhere in the day."

They discussed duly the important subject of where to go, and decided on an art gallery. Both adored pictures.

Clarice dressed her mistress in her silks and furs and decided to follow the party with extra wraps for her mistress in case the day should prove colder than they thought, and in order to gratify her own penchant for sight-seeing.

No thought came to them of the great surprise that awaited them in the famous art gallery. They went forward to meet it all unconsciously, even as Laurel awaited their coming among the pictures and statues, all unconscious of what was hastening to her.

They were unusually gay. Beatrix had been pining a little of late under the depressing influence of the rainy, dismal weather. The bright sunshine revived her spirits and brought the warm pink roses to her cheeks. She laughed and chatted gayly to her delighted husband.

They loitered in the gallery and admired the beautiful paintings and statues, all the work of master hands long since dissolved to dust. They saw only two persons besides themselves—a lady and gentleman with their faces turned toward the beautiful painting of a Madonna. The lady had golden hair that was strangely familiar to Beatrix and Clarice, but then, many of the Englishwomen had golden hair. Each said to herself that it was only fancy that it reminded them of Laurel Vane.

So they went on slowly and unconsciously, and the handsome man and beautiful girl turned around and faced them.

They saw the young face whiten with fear, heard the frightened moan break from the trembling lips, saw her reel dizzily, and fall like a stone at their feet—and they knew that this was Laurel Vane, that St. Leon Le Roy was her husband, and that her wretched falsehood had found her out!

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

Mr. Le Roy, turning in the same moment with his wife, saw two faces that he recognized—Cyril Wentworth's that he had seen once in New York, and Clarice's, which he remembered perfectly well. Beatrix he did not know. He glanced at her carelessly, little thinking what an influence the pretty blonde had exerted over his life. [Pg 63]

A pang of jealousy, keen, swift, and terrible as the lightning's flash tore through his heart as he beheld his worshiped bride waver and fall, like one dead, to the floor.

He believed that the mere sight of Cyril Wentworth's face had produced that terrible emotion

that had stricken her down like a broken flower at their feet.

For an instant he stood motionless, almost petrified by his agitation, then he bent down over the beautiful face that only a moment ago had been lifted to his sparkling and glowing with love and happiness. It was pale and rigid now, and the jetty fringe of the lashes lay heavily on the white cheeks as if they would never lift again from the sweet dark eyes.

Quick as he was, light-footed Clarice was before him. She was kneeling down loosening the furs and laces about the throat of the unconscious girl with deft, easy fingers. She looked up at him with a strange glance.

"It is only a faint," she said, "but she may be some time in recovering. You had better go out and bring *eau de Cologne*."

He obeyed her like one in a dream, and the moment he was gone quick-witted Clarice borrowed Mrs. Wentworth's *vinaigrette*.

"I only sent him out on a pretext," she said. "We must get her revived before he returns. Mr. Wentworth, will you please remove her gloves and chafe her hands? No, perhaps your wife might do it better," she added, with a quick afterthought.

Beatrix had been clinging to her husband's arm, staring like one dazed at the strange scene. She knelt down and drew off Laurel's dark kid gloves and chafed the delicate, dimpled, white hands. She saw a broad gold wedding-ring on the slender finger of one small hand, guarded by a keeper of magnificent diamonds and rubies. All three looked significantly at one another, and Clarice said, woman-like, to her mistress:

"Mrs. Wentworth, I told you so."

Cyril could not repress a slight laugh as he stood gazing down upon them. His keen perception told him the truth.

"It is Laurel Vane," he said, and Beatrix answered, "Yes," in a dazed tone, while the maid supplemented quickly, "Or rather Laurel Le Roy."

At that moment Laurel shivered and opened her eyes. She saw herself supported in Clarice's arms, while Beatrix, kneeling by her, chafed her small hands. They saw her glance wander past them yearningly, and a moan of pitiful despair came from her white lips as she missed the face she sought.

"You fainted, and Mr. Le Roy has gone out for some *eau de Cologne*," said the maid.

A touch of color came into the blanched face. She turned her dark, frightened eyes up to their cold faces.

"You have betrayed me!" she said, in a faint, almost dying, tone.

Beatrix seemed incapable of speech.

Clarice answered, coldly:

"We have said nothing yet!" Then she continued, gravely: "Miss Vane, are you Mr. Le Roy's wife?"

"Yes, I am his wife," Laurel answered, faintly. And she tore her hands from Beatrix, and covered her face with them. [Pg 64]

No one spoke for a moment, then Clarice asked, slowly:

"Did you deceive him to the end?"

"To the bitter end!" shuddered Laurel, in a hollow tone.

Then suddenly she let the shielding hands fall from her burning face, and looked at Beatrix.

"Do not look at me so sternly and coldly, Mrs. Wentworth," she cried. "You sent me there. Are you not to blame?"

No one could have believed that Mrs. Wentworth's gentle face could grow so hard and cold.

Laurel Vane had so bitterly betrayed the trust she reposed in her that she did not know how to forgive her.

"Do not charge me with your folly, your madness!" she cried, indignantly. "My sin was bad enough—but yours is beyond pardon. How dared you, *Laurel Vane*, marry the proud, rich St. Leon Le Roy?"

"I loved him—he loved me!" moaned the wretched young bride.

"And what will become of his love now when he learns the truth?" queried Beatrix, with stinging scorn.

Cyril hastily interposed.

"Do not be hard on her, Beatrix. She was kind to us. Be kind to her. See, she is almost heart-broken by your scorn!"

Laurel looked at the handsome, kindly face. It was full of sympathy and pity, not hard and angry like the women's faces. Her despairing heart filled with new hope. She clasped her hands, and looked at him with dark, appealing eyes.

"Yes, I pitied you, I helped you to your love," she said, pleadingly. "Will you let them rob me of mine? Will you let them betray me?"

All the pity in his heart, all his manly compassion was stirred into life by her words and looks.

"We love each other," she went on, pathetically. "We love each other even as you and your wife love. Do not come between us yet! Let us be happy a little longer!"

"Beatrix, you hear," said Cyril, bending down to take his wife's hand in his own. "They love even as we love, dear. Can you bear to part them—to betray her? She is little more than a child. You will break her heart. The beginning of it all lies with us. Do we not owe her our pity at least—our pity and our silence?"

"Your silence—that is all I ask," cried the culprit, eagerly. "The end will come soon enough. Let me have a little respite. Tell me where to find you to-morrow. Mr. Le Roy has an engagement out then, and I will come to you. I will tell you how it all happened! I will beg for your pity on my bended knees!"

She began to weep passionately. Beatrix could not bear those bitter tears. She drew out her card-case hastily.

"Here is my address," she said. "Come to me to-morrow, and tell me the whole story. I can judge better than what is best for me to do."

She did not pity Laurel much. She felt angry with her for her presumption in marrying one so far above her as Mr. Le Roy. And then the folly, the madness of it. She could not understand the mad love that had driven Laurel, step by step, into her terrible position.

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"Mr. Le Roy is coming. Do not let him suspect anything wrong," said Cyril, hastily.

He turned with a smile to meet the handsome, stately gentleman.

"Mr. Le Roy, I am Cyril Wentworth," he said, genially. "Permit me to assure you that your wife is quite recovered, and to present you to my wife—Mrs. Wentworth."

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

"Married!" said St. Leon to himself, with a start, and a quick glance at Beatrix. He bowed to her gracefully, then hurried to his wife's side.

"You are better, Beatrix?" he said, anxiously, and they all saw his passionate heart looking out of the beautiful eyes he bent on her pale and tear-stained face.

She clung to him in a sort of nervous terror and fear.

"Yes, I am better, thanks to the goodness of Clarice and her mistress," she faltered. "You must thank them for their kindness to me, St. Leon, and take me away."

He obeyed her request in a few courteous words, bowed to the party, and led his wife away, outwardly cool and collected, but on fire with jealous pain.

"She loves him still! She fainted at the bare sight of him!" he muttered to himself.

"My God! why did she marry me, then? Was it for wealth and position?"

The bitter doubt tore his heart like a knife. An unconscious coldness grew up in his heart toward her.

He placed her silently in the carriage, and, springing in beside her, gave himself up to bitter reflections.

The carriage whirled them away to their hotel, and as it rattled over the streets Laurel watched her husband's cold, grave face with wonder.

"What is it, St. Leon?" she asked him, slipping her arm timidly in his. "Why do you look so grave?"

"I am puzzled," he answered.

"Over what, St. Leon?" asked the beautiful girl.

"Over your fainting spell," he answered, moodily. "You told me you had ceased to love Cyril Wentworth, but at the bare sight of him you fell like one dead. What am I to think, Beatrix?"

It came over her like a flash, that he was jealous of Cyril Wentworth—of Cyril Wentworth, whom she had never beheld until to-day.

How she longed for him to know the truth, to tell him that she had never loved mortal man save him whom she called her husband! But it was one of the pains and penalties of her position that she could not confess to St. Leon. He must go on believing that her first pure love had been lavished on another, must go on doubting her, for his looks and words assured her that the first seeds of jealousy had been sown in his heart.

Hot tears of pain and humiliation gathered in her eyes and splashed heavily down her pale cheeks.

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"Oh, St. Leon, you do not, you cannot, believe that I love him still?" she sighed.

"Why, then, your agitation at that chance meeting?" he inquired.

"I was startled—only that," she answered. "It was like seeing a ghost. And you must remember

there was Clarice, too. I assure you I was more startled at the sight of her than by Mr. Wentworth. It was a nervousness, agitation, fright, what you will, St. Leon, but not love. No, no, no, not love! I love you only, my husband. You are the life of my life!"

She clasped her hands around his arm, and looked up to him with dark, pathetic eyes.

"I am not perfect, St. Leon," she said, "and life is not all sunshine. Some day the heavy, lowering clouds of fate will pour out their blinding rain upon our heads. You may believe many hard things of me then, St. Leon, but you may be sure of one thing always, dear. I love you now and I shall love you forever, with the maddest, deepest passion a woman's heart can cherish!"

He had never heard her speak with such passion before. Her love had been like a timid bird brooding softly in her heart, too shy to soar into the sunlight, but the words burst from her now eloquent with her heart's emotion, and made sacred by the burning drops that fell from her eyes. He could not but believe her. The jealous misery fled from his heart as he clasped her in his arms and kissed the trembling rosebud mouth.

"Forgive me, darling, for doubting you," he said, repentantly. "It was because I love you so dearly, and I have always been so absurdly jealous of Cyril Wentworth. I would give anything upon earth to be able to say that you had never loved any one but me."

And she could not tell him that it was true. It was a part of her punishment that this dark shadow—the thought that her first love had been given another—should never be lifted from his life. She knew that it was a pain to his jealous nature, but her lips were sealed. Some day he would know the truth, she said to herself bitterly, but then it would come too late for his happiness.

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## CHAPTER XXX.

"I loved him, Mrs. Wentworth. That is all my defense. Call me weak, cowardly, wicked, if you will; but I could not put the temptation from me. Think what all my life had been—how dull, how sad, how lonely! Was it easy to put away happiness when it came to me in so fair a guise?"

The white hands were clasped imploringly, the dark eyes were lifted pleadingly as the sad words fell from Laurel's lips. Beatrix Wentworth and Clarice Wells, her judges and accusers, looked gravely upon the tortured face of the culprit—the fairest culprit that was ever arraigned for her sin.

"Do you call it happiness?" said Beatrix Wentworth. "I should not think you would know one happy hour, living on the verge of a volcano that may destroy you at any moment. I should think that your sorrow and repentance would almost kill you."

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"But I do not repent!" cried Laurel desperately. "I shall never repent while I remain with St. Leon. I am too happy, in spite of my fears, for sorrow or repentance. When I am torn away from him, when I have lost his love, then I shall repent, then I shall understand the depths of my dreadful sin; but never before!"

They looked at her in wonder. They could not understand her. Surely she was mad—the glamour of passion had obscured her reason!

"And when the end comes—when he has put you from him—what will you do then, poor child!" asked Beatrix, slowly.

"Then I shall die," the beautiful girl answered, despairingly.

And again they did not know what to say to her. She had no thoughts outside of this love that she held by so slight a thread. She could see nothing beyond it but death. Beatrix could not help feeling vexed with her. She loved her own young husband with a fond, romantic love, but she could not comprehend the madness of Laurel's devotion.

"It is not so easy to die, Laurel," she said, impatiently. "You are a woman now, and you must not answer me like a child. Your sin will find you out some day, and you will perhaps be cast adrift on the world. You should have some plans formed for that time."

There was a moment's silence; then Laurel murmured, tremblingly:

"St. Leon loves me—perhaps he will forgive me."

Clarice Wells gave an audible sigh from her corner. Beatrix murmured, "Poor child!"

And the mistress and maid looked at each other in silence a moment. They did not know how to deal with this nature. Both wondered in themselves if St. Leon Le Roy would indeed forgive her falsehood. They did not think so.

Beatrix toyed nervously with the tassels of her pale-blue morning dress.

"Laurel," she said, after a moment. "Clarice and I have formed a plan for you. We do not want to betray you to your husband. We think it would be better if you confessed the truth to him yourself."

They never forgot how deathly white she grew, nor how wild and frightened the dark eyes looked. She threw out her hands as if to ward off a blow.

"Confess to St. Leon? Why, I would sooner die!" she gasped.

"But, my dear child," remonstrated Beatrix, "he would be far more likely to forgive you if you confessed to him yourself than if I betrayed you."

"You will not do that, oh, you will not do that! You could not be so cruel!" gasped Laurel, throwing herself impulsively at Beatrix's feet. "Oh, Mrs. Wentworth, I helped *you* to happiness! Do not rob me of mine!"

Clarice raised her gently and replaced her in her seat.

"You have not heard all my plan out, Laurel," said Beatrix. "I do not forget my debt to you. I would sooner help you than betray you. I was going on to say that if you would be brave enough to confess to St. Leon how you have wronged him, I too would confess to him. I would tell him how much I was to blame. I would beg him to forgive you because you were so innocent and ignorant, and because you loved him so. Then—if it came to the worst—if in his pride and his wrath he should put you away from him—you might come to us—to Cyril and me."

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The hapless young creature did not answer a word. She stared at Beatrix mutely with wide, wild eyes like a hunted fawn's.

"Well, what do you say, Laurel?" inquired Beatrix. "Will you do as I wish you?"

"It is too terrible a risk. I do not dare," moaned Laurel, hiding her face in her hands.

Then for a time there was silence. Beatrix was hurt and chagrined that her plan had been discarded. She thought Laurel was a headstrong, willful child, rushing blindly upon her own destruction.

But she could not help pitying the girl, her fear and misery were so great. She desisted from advising her. It seemed too much like torturing some lovely, helpless creature. The hunted look in the dark eyes pained her.

"After all, is she any worse than I am?" said Beatrix to herself. "I deceived my parents. I risked everything for love's sake, and this poor child has done no more than that. I must not be angry with her. I must remember always that it was I who led her into temptation."

She went to her gently, she took the white hands from the pale, tear-stained face, and held them kindly in both of hers.

"Laurel, do not look so miserable and heart-broken," she said, gently. "You need not be afraid of me."

Laurel looked at her with a flash of hope in her humid eyes.

"Do you mean that you will not betray me?" she panted.

"I will not betray you," Beatrix answered. "I pity you too much, my poor child, and I know that the end will come soon enough. Far be it from me to hasten the evil hour."

She was glad she had spoken so kindly when she saw the lovely flush of joy that came into the sensitive face. Laurel thanked and blessed her passionately, then the dark eyes turned to Clarice.

"And will you have mercy on me, too?" she said. "I have always been afraid of you, Clarice. I have always remembered what you said. The words have haunted me."

"I meant what I said," replied the maid. "If I had seen you going to the altar with him, I should have betrayed you, and saved him. It would have been my duty."

"And now?" Laurel questioned faintly.

"It has gone too far," answered Clarice. "You are Mr. Le Roy's wedded wife. What God hath joined together, no man must put asunder."

She thanked them with such trembling passion and joy that they could have wept.

"I do not know whether I am doing right," said Beatrix. "But I am very happy, and I remember always that you helped me to my happiness, and that I thoughtlessly led you into temptation. I will keep your secret, Laurel, and may God help you when your hour of reckoning comes, as it too surely will, my poor child, sooner or later."

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## CHAPTER XXXI.

Laurel was fortunate enough to get back to her hotel before Mr. Le Roy returned from his engagement with the friend whom he had unexpectedly encountered in London. She removed her street dress immediately, and he never suspected the momentous visit she had made that morning to Cyril Wentworth's wife. She was gay and loving, as usual, and he dreamed not what bitter tears had dimmed her eyes that morning in her fear that he would find her out in her sin.

But that night she said to him, with pretty impatience:

"When are we going to leave London, St. Leon? I am very tired of the rain and the cold."

"I thought you had not done sight-seeing yet," he said, a little surprised at her capriciousness. "There are many places of interest which you have not visited yet."

"I am tired of it all," she declared. "One wearies of the rain and the smoke and the fog. I should like to go to Italy, where the sun shines all day, and the air is balmy and warm. Will you take me,

St. Leon?"

"We will go to-morrow, if you wish," he replied. "There is nothing to detain us in London."

"To-morrow it shall be!" cried Laurel.

He humored her caprice and took her to Italy. She did not breathe freely until she was out of London. She was horribly afraid of meeting the Wentworths again.

They hired a charming little villa in Southern Italy, and lived there several months, leading a beautiful, idyllic life that charmed Laurel. She called the pretty place Eden, in loving memory of her home.

Letters came often from Mrs. Le Roy, occasionally from the Gordons. Mrs. Gordon was not fond of letter-writing, and though she loved her daughter dearly, she wrote to her but seldom. These letters Laurel always posted to Beatrix Wentworth in London with her own hands. She felt sure that Beatrix would understand and be glad to receive them.

By dint of earnest application she had acquired a very fair imitation of Mrs. Wentworth's writing. But her conscience always reproached her when she answered those fond, parental letters. She always felt the burden of her guilt most deeply then. So her letters were brief and infrequent. But the Gordons thought nothing of it. Beatrix had never been a diffuse writer, and they supposed she was all absorbed in her happiness now. Laurel never expressed the least desire to return to America. Mr. Le Roy was rather amused at her persistent preference for the Old World.

One thing pleased Mr. Le Roy very much while they remained in Italy.

His wife developed a sudden taste for music. She regretted that she had never learned the piano. Masters were procured for her at her own desire, and for one who had professed not to care for music, her progress was exceedingly rapid.

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When summer came they wearied of Italy, and went to Switzerland.

Ah, those happy days abroad—that long, sweet honeymoon! It was so heavenly sweet, it was no wonder that Laurel could not repent of the fraud by which she had won her splendid husband. Life was a dream of Elysium.

"Love took up the glass of time, and turned it in his glowing hands,  
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands."

She was beginning to feel almost secure in her happiness, when one evening the shadow fell, as it always falls, unexpectedly, on her life.

She had come down dressed for an opera to which her husband had promised to take her, and she was looking her loveliest. Her robe of white silk and pink brocade was exquisitely becoming, and she wore great flashing diamonds on her round white throat and arms. She had never looked lovelier, but St. Leon did not notice her radiant beauty. There was a shadow on his dark, handsome face. He came and put his arms around the beautiful figure, crushing it against his breast, reckless how he rumbled her dainty laces.

"Beatrix, my darling, I have bad news," he said, hoarsely.

She started, and uttered a cry. Her lips grew livid, she seemed to shrink in the fond arms that held her.

"Do not be frightened, my love," he said. "We will hope for the best."

"What is it?" she gasped through her dry, parched lips.

"I have received a cablegram from America. My mother is very ill. We must return home immediately," he said, in a voice shaken by anxiety and emotion.

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## CHAPTER XXXII.

He had expected that Beatrix would be startled and distressed, but he was not prepared for the burst of emotion with which she received his news.

"Home! home!" she burst out, in a voice that was like a wail of despair, then suddenly flinging her arms about his neck, she broke into tempestuous sobbing as if the very depths of her heart were stirred by throes of keenest anguish.

He was touched and startled by this display of affectionate grief for his mother. Never had he clasped her so fondly, never kissed her so tenderly as now when he believed that her heart ached and her tears flowed for the sake of the mother whom he loved.

"Beatrix, my own sweet love, do not grieve so wildly," he said, caressingly. "She is ill, but it may not be fatal. I broke the news to you too suddenly. I did not realize until this moment what a tender loving heart you have. Cheer up, darling. It may not be as bad as we fear. We will pray for her recovery."

She threw back her head and looked in his face with wild dark eyes all swimming in tears.

"Oh, St. Leon, what did the cablegram say?" she aspirated, eagerly.

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"That she is very ill, dear, but that did not necessarily imply a fatal sickness," he answered, soothingly.

She caught at the words with the eagerness of desperation.

"Oh, St. Leon, why need we go home at all then?"

"Beatrix!"

He did not know himself how coldly he put her from him, how sharp and rebuking his tone sounded. He was hurt and amazed. It seemed to him that he could not have understood her aright. He looked at the beautiful form drooping before him humbly, and he saw that he had frightened her by his sudden harshness. Her lips were trembling with fear.

"Beatrix," he said, "perhaps I have not understood you aright. Did you really express a desire not to go home?"

She looked at the dark, handsome face with the touch of sternness upon it and her heart sunk within her.

"I thought—I thought"—she faltered, "that—if Mrs. Le Roy were not so very ill, we need not—perhaps—go home just yet. Oh, forgive me, St. Leon. I did not mean to be selfish. I love the Old World so well I cannot bear the thought of going back to America!"

For the first time since their happy wedding-day he looked coldly and sternly at his fair young bride. She had almost forgotten how those proud lips could curl, how that mobile face could express the lightning passions of his soul. She saw now what a dreadful mistake she had made.

"Oh, Beatrix, how I have deceived myself!" he cried. "Do you know what I thought just now when you burst into tears? I believed that all your grief was for my mother, because you loved her and were sorry for her. I never loved you so well as when I thought that you shared so wholly in my affection for my parent. And yet in the next breath you show me my mistake. Your pleasure, your comfort, ranks higher in your thoughts than my mother's welfare! Oh! child! are you, indeed, so selfish?"

The sadness and reproach in his voice tore her guilty heart like a knife. She flew to his arms—she would not be held at a distance.

"I am a wretch!" she cried, remorsefully. "Forgive me, St. Leon. I *do* love Mrs. Le Roy. I *do* grieve over her illness! It was only my abominable selfishness and thoughtlessness that made me so heartless. I have grown selfish, forgetting every one else and finding all my happiness in you. Forget it, if you can—at least, forgive it. I am ready to go home with you immediately. Nay, I am most anxious to go."

But her voice faltered, and she shed such hot tears upon his breast that they seemed to blister her cheeks. It seemed to her that she was declaring her own death-warrant.

He could do no less than forgive her. Indeed, her sorrow and repentance were so great that he felt that he had been too harsh and stern with her. He remembered that she was only a child, and she had been so pleased with her travels, it was no wonder that she had been disappointed when the end came upon her so suddenly.

"Besides, I could not in reason expect her to be as fond of my mother as I am," he said to himself, apologetically, and to ease the smart of his disappointment.

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He kissed the fair young face until her tears were dried, and told her that she was forgiven for her momentary selfishness, and that next year they would come abroad again.

"To-morrow we must be upon the sea. I am very anxious to reach home," he said, little guessing that his words pierced her heart like the point of a deadly poisoned dagger.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

All of the young bride's happiness began to wane from that hour. The shadow of the nearing future began to fall upon her heart. The "coming events cast their shadows before."

A subtle change came over her. Her cheek was a shade less bright, her voice had an unconscious tone of pathos, the dark eyes drooped beneath their shady lashes. Sometimes she fell into deep reveries that lasted for hours. The return voyage was not so pleasant by any means as the other had been. Laurel was going away from her peril then, she was returning to it now.

St. Leon gave all his thoughts and all his love to his fair bride. Now he divided them with her and his mother. He was very fond of his handsome, stately lady mother, and deeply distressed over her illness. He longed to fly to her on the wings of love. He chafed over their slow progress, bitterly impatient of the adverse winds and waves that hindered the gallant ship from making progress. If he had known how his wife welcomed every storm he would have been horrified. If some hidden rock had sunk the steamer, and she and St. Leon had gone to the bottom clasped

"In one another's arms,  
And silent in a last embrace,"

she would have been glad, she would have thought that that was happiness compared with what



lay before her.

St. Leon did not notice the slight yet subtle change in his darling, so absorbed was he in anxiety over his mother. Perhaps he thought she shared in his trouble. He knew that her devotion to him was more manifest than ever before, and he repaid it with the love of his inmost heart, but he was very grave and thoughtful. The dread that he might find his mother dead weighed heavily on his spirits.

Poor Laurel in her terror for herself did not give many thoughts to Mrs. Le Roy. The lesser evil was swallowed up in the greater. The Gordons had returned to New York in the spring. Once she returned home, a meeting with them was inevitable. And then—what! Detection, exposure, banishment, despair!

Through all her dread and terror one spark of hope burned feebly in her heart. She knew that her husband loved her with a deep, and mighty love. Perhaps through that love he would forgive her.

"I could forgive *him* anything," she said to herself with the divine love of woman. "Surely, surely he will forgive me!"

It was May when they reached New York. Laurel had had eight months of happiness now—almost perfect happiness. She was little more than a child still. She was only seventeen. But she had gained great benefit from her happy bridal trip. Her beauty was deepened and intensified, she had acquired polish and dignity, and there was a sweet and gracious womanliness about her that was exquisitely charming. St. Leon said to himself exultantly that he should be very proud to introduce his bonny bride to New York society next winter. She would be without a peer for loveliness.

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"I am so impatient to go home to my sick mother at Eden, that I am almost selfish enough to ask you to pass through New York without stopping to see your parents," he said, when they landed.

She hastily assured him that she had no intention of stopping. Her anxiety to reach Eden was as great as his own. There would be time enough to see her parents when they were assured of Mrs. Le Roy's well being.

He did not notice how deathly pale she was, but thanking her gratefully for what appeared to him a sweet self-sacrifice, accepted it, and she said to herself with a beating heart:

"I have still a little respite. I shall see Eden once more before I am banished forever."

The home on the Hudson looked Eden-like indeed that bright, warm day when they walked, arm in arm, up to the house. The trees and shrubberies were tinted with the tender green of spring, a soft, warm air, redolent with flowers, fanned their faces. St. Leon looked pleased at being home again, but it struck him all at once that his wife looked pale and wan and miserable.

"It is plain to be seen, Beatrix, that you have no joy in your home-coming," he said, unable to conceal his disappointment. "And yet I thought—indeed you used to say—that you adored Eden."

"Indeed I do! I love every tree and flower, every tiniest blade of grass on the place. I am very happy in my home-coming," she cried, eagerly, but she had a guilty, miserable inward consciousness that he did not believe her. Her changeful tell tale face had betrayed her all too plainly.

They went into the house, and then she forgot for awhile all her own selfish terrors as St. Leon forgot his disappointment over his wife's reluctance to come home.

For the shadow of the death-angel's wing hung darkly over Eden!

Mrs. Le Roy was yet very ill with a low typhoid fever and pneumonia. Surrounded by skillful nurses and the ablest physicians, there were yet grave doubts whether she would ever recover. The disease was deeply seated, and the physicians could not conceal from the invalid's stricken son their fears of a fatal result. She had been dangerously ill three weeks now—wavering, as it were, between life and death. They would do all they could, the physicians said, but the issue lay with God.

In that dark hour Laurel was her husband's comforter. She put self aside. She forgot that a shadow deeper than death brooded darkly over her own young life. She whispered peace and hope to the troubled heart.

"I will pray for her," she said, "and I will nurse her. Perhaps love can save her even where paid attention fails. Then, too, she will be so glad to have her children home again. Happiness may have a good effect upon her. Do not despair, St. Leon, I have the greatest faith that she will be spared to us."

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His heavy heart unconsciously grew lighter at the sweet, hopeful words. And one thing she said came true at least. Though they were almost afraid to break the news to Mrs. Le Roy of her son's arrival, and set about it in the most cautious manner, it undoubtedly produced a beneficial effect on her. She seemed to grow better from that hour, and her joy at seeing Laurel was as great as that she evinced in the return of St. Leon.

Laurel, as she had declared she would, became the most devoted and patient nurse at Mrs. Le Roy's bedside. Her love and her eagerness to be of use served her instead of experience. There was no step so light, no touch so cool and soft as hers, no face so eagerly welcomed by the bedside of the sufferer.

"Beatrix is my ministering angel," she confided to her son, and Laurel, hearing it, was thrilled with inward joy.

"I have won a place in her heart. When my dark hour comes, she will take my part, she will plead for me," the poor child said to herself.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

Mrs. Gordon, reclining at ease on a satin divan in her elegant parlor, was entertaining a caller—no less a person than the beautiful widow, Mrs. Merivale.

The wife of the wealthy publisher was a pale, faded, pretty woman, once a belle and beauty, now a chronic invalid. She mingled but little in society, on account of her delicate health, but chance had made her acquainted with Maud Merivale, and the fair widow for some reason of her own had followed up the acquaintance. Mrs. Gordon was rather pleased than otherwise with this new friend. She loved beauty, and Mrs. Merivale was decidedly good to look upon. All the adventitious aid of art had been called in to preserve her fading charms; and in the richest, and most becoming of spring toilets, she looked very fair and sweet and youthful in the aristocratic semi-darkness of the curtained parlor.

They had been discussing a subject dear to Mrs. Gordon's matronly heart, but full of secret gall and bitterness to the widow—the marriage of Beatrix Gordon to St. Leon Le Roy.

Inwardly fuming with jealous rage, Mrs. Merivale held her passions in with a strong rein, and smiled her sweetest as she dilated on her last summer's visit to Eden where she had met Beatrix and enthusiastically "fallen in love with her on the spot."

"So beautiful, so graceful," said Mrs. Merivale, arching her penciled brows. "She will make so charming a mistress for Eden. And they are home from Europe, you tell me?"

"Two weeks ago," answered Mrs. Gordon.

"You have seen them, of course—how happy the meeting must have been between the long-parted mother and daughter," sentimentally.

"No, I have not seen my darling yet," sighed Mrs. Gordon. "They were suddenly summoned home by the illness of Mrs. Le Roy and did not have time to communicate with me. Mr. Gordon has promised to take me down to Eden in a few days, though. I am so impatient to see Beatrix I can scarcely wait."

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"No doubt," smiled the visitor, sympathetically. She had followed Mrs. Gordon's eyes to a life-size portrait of a pretty blue-eyed girl that hung against the wall. She had seen the lady's glance wander in the same direction several times. Her curiosity was aroused, and, looking critically at the really beautiful portrait, she detected a strong resemblance between the fair, fresh, girlish face and the pretty, faded, matronly woman.

"Your own portrait, is it not?" she asked, with a smile.

Mrs. Gordon looked pleased and flattered.

"Is it really so much like me?" she asked.

"Your image! I should have recognized it anywhere!" pronounced the widow, following up the good impression she had made.

"Well, my daughter was always said to resemble me; but really, now, Mrs. Merivale, you must have recognized Beatrix. You flatter me too much," simpered Mrs. Gordon.

Mrs. Merivale's false smiles and grimaces gave way for once to an expression of honest surprise.

"Do you mean to tell me that it isn't your portrait—taken when you were, perhaps, a little younger?" she asked.

"No, it is not mine. Do you not recognize my daughter, Mrs. Merivale? It is Beatrix herself."

"Beatrix!"

Mrs. Merivale gazed bewildered at the fair young pictured face. The soft blue eyes smiled into hers, the pale-gold hair waved softly over the low, white brow, the face had a fair, refined loveliness all its own, but it was not the face she recalled as that of Beatrix Gordon. There flashed before her mind's eye a face bright and soft like a tropic flower, lighted by dark, starlike eyes, crowned by grand tresses of dusky, burnished gold—a face before whose rare and witching beauty this other one paled like a flower before a star.

She looked at Mrs. Gordon, surprise and bewilderment on her face, her turquois-blue eyes open to their widest.

"Are you jesting?" she said. "Or have you another daughter? You do not really wish me to believe that this is Beatrix?"

"Why not?" Mrs. Gordon asked, a little gravely.

"It is not the least bit like her," declared Mrs. Merivale, who had left her seat and rustled over to the portrait; "it is utterly unlike her! The eyes are blue here, the hair pale gold; yet your daughter whom I saw at Eden had dark eyes and hair of the darkest golden shade."

Mrs. Gordon laughed lightly.

"You have surely forgotten how Beatrix looked," she said. "That canvas represents her truly and perfectly. The best judges have agreed that the portrait is marvelously true to nature. My dear Mrs. Merivale, you are thinking of some one else. I have no other child than Beatrix, and there are no dark eyes in our family."

Mrs. Merivale remained silent for a moment. Her face had a dazed expression.

"I am *not* mistaken," she said to herself. "Is it likely I should forget how the girl looked who stole St. Leon from me? She had great black eyes, full of fire and soul. She was rarely beautiful. This portrait looks a mere doll beside her. And yet Mrs. Gordon swears that this is Beatrix Gordon. If it is true, as she says, then there is some mystery about it. What does it mean?"

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She went back to her seat again and replied to Mrs. Gordon with a light laugh.

"Yes, I see now that I was mistaken. I was thinking of some one else. One meets so many fair faces in society."

But to herself she was saying:

"If there is a mystery, I will find it out. Nothing will please me so well as to injure the girl who married St. Leon Le Roy."

But though her suspicions were aroused, they were vague and unformed. She did not dream of the real truth.

Before leaving she said, with her most innocent and engaging air:

"I have a great mind to run down to Eden with you when you go. It is only recently that I received a letter from Mrs. Le Roy, inviting me to visit her. We are quite old friends, you know. Shall you object to have me make one of your party?"

Mrs. Gordon thought it would be rather pleasant than otherwise to have the pretty, vivacious widow accompany them to Eden. She expressed her opinion very graciously, and Mrs. Merivale was delighted.

"A thousand thanks," she twittered. "I shall enjoy the trip with you and Mr. Gordon so much. And I do so want to see dear Mrs. Le Roy, and our sweet bride and her husband, who, by the bye, was once my *fiancé*. But that was long ago. I threw him over for Mr. Merivale, who had the most money, although, unfortunately, he sunk a great deal in a foolish speculation after I married him. Ah, well, St. Leon will bear me no ill will now, when he has secured such a bonny bride."

She lingered until they had named the day for the trip, then departed, full of vague plans against the happiness of St. Leon's bride.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

Ross Powell had been bitterly chagrined and disappointed at his failure to trace Laurel Vane, after his meeting with her at the gates of Eden.

Her beauty had inspired him with a passion that all her anger and scorn and detestation were powerless to chill. While he tried to hate her for her disdain, he could not help loving her for the rare loveliness that had won him at first sight. Brooding deeply over the subject after his return to New York, he made up his mind that, if he could not possess Laurel in any other way, he would make her his wife. He did not doubt but that she would be delighted at the chance of becoming Mrs. Powell, and, after coming to this magnanimous resolve, he was exceedingly anxious to find her out and propose to her.

But fate was against him. His clerky duties kept him chained to his desk so closely that it was only at the Christmas holidays he found an opportunity of returning to the vicinity of Eden to prosecute his search. After long cogitation on the subject, he had concluded that Laurel had misled him in stating that she was not staying at Eden. He now believed that she belonged to the staff of domestics at Eden, and that she had hidden her identity under an assumed name.

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"The little jade tricked me cleverly that time, but I'll catch up with her yet!" he muttered, angrily, to himself, for he did not relish the idea of having been duped by a simple girl like Laurel.

So, with his faculties sharpened by reflection, and spurred on by his passion—which only gained in strength by the months of suspense he had endured—Ross Powell returned to the palace on the Hudson, where he hoped to find Laurel employed in some menial capacity by the proud, rich Le Roys.

Alas for Laurel if she had remained at Eden! for the villain would most undoubtedly have detected her this time; but, as the reader knows, she was absent in Europe with her husband. Mr. Powell, in a sly, underhand way, informed himself thoroughly regarding the household at Eden, and became satisfied that the object of his search was not there. He was bitterly enraged at his non-success in the pursuit of the beautiful, and, as he imagined, unprotected orphan.

"I was a fool to let her slip through my fingers so easily that day," he told himself. "I wish I had followed her, and let Mr. Gordon's business go to the mischief until I had settled my own! A little delay would not have mattered to him, while my own cause was ruined by my attention to business. Never mind! Once I get on her track again, she shall not escape me! Twice she has given me the slip. Let her look to the third time!"

Alas! poor Laurel, in her summer home across the sea, she had forgotten this crafty spider that lay in wait for her, whose love was crueler than hate.

He returned to the city, sullen, angry, disappointed, but more anxious than ever to find her. A new idea had taken possession of his mind.

It occurred to him that Laurel had perhaps gone abroad in the capacity of maid to the young bride, Mrs. Le Roy.

This idea having once taken possession of his mind, was dwelt on until it became a rooted belief. He was quite certain that he had solved the mystery of her absence now. He cursed her for a clever little wretch, who could never have eluded him so cleverly if she had not inherited her father's brains.

"And he was a genius," he said. "Egad, it seems a little strange that old Vane's pretty, high-bred looking girl should descend to the level of a common servant. He was proud, although he ruined himself by drink. I wonder if his bones don't turn in the coffin at thought of little Laurel waiting on Beatrix Gordon!"

He made arrangements to be informed at the earliest hour of the return of Mr. Le Roy and his bride to Eden. He swore that quick-witted Laurel should not forestall him and get away this time.

"If she only knew that I meant to do the fair thing by her and make her Mrs. Powell, I have no doubt she would be deuced glad to have me find her," he thought, egotistically. "It's a bother that I can't have her without, but she's a high-strung little filly, and has her own notions. Perhaps I can arrange for a mock marriage. Then, when I am tired of her, I can drop her more easily. She will drown herself, of course, when she finds out that she has been deceived."

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So ran the musings of the wretch, and his impatience reached fever-heat as the dreary winter months dragged away and still Mr. Le Roy lingered abroad with his lovely bride, little dreaming in their happiness of the clerk sitting behind the desk in Mr. Gordon's office and growing ever more and more impatient for their return.

Winter passed away at length, followed by March with its chilling, boisterous winds, its clouded, murky skies; April came with its sunshine and rain, May with its balmy airs and fragrant flowers. Still they came not. How he hated those grand, rich people who could loiter their time away amid the beauties and luxuries of the old world, and keep Laurel away from him, losing her heart perhaps to some musical Italian, frog-eating Frenchman, or sturdy Englishman. A vague, bitter jealousy of he knew not what filled his heart.

He never forgot how glad he felt when in the latter part of May he heard that Mr. Le Roy and his bride had returned to Eden. A burning impatience filled him to get away from the office and go down to Eden to assure himself if Laurel were really there.

He made some excuse of indisposition or private business—in fact, the first ready lie that came to his tongue—and asked Mr. Gordon for a holiday; it was granted, and on the same day Ross Powell went down to Eden, so confident of success that the disappointment he experienced staggered him with its bitterness and intensity.

For when he went boldly to the servants' entrance and asked for young Mrs. Le Roy's maid, a pert foreigner, a mademoiselle whom St. Leon had engaged in Paris to attend his wife, came to him. Her broken English, her voluble French, her cap and ribbon, alike disgusted him. He crushed a bitter oath between his teeth and went away.

"It is just as I feared and dreaded," he thought. "Some jackanapes over the sea has won her, and she would not return with the Le Roys, who had to engage that painted, beribboned, chattering monkey in her place. I have a great mind to go and ask Mr. Gordon's daughter to tell me about Laurel Vane."

But on second thoughts he concluded not to do so. It would come to Mr. Gordon's ears and might possibly set unpleasant inquiries on foot. After all it could not avail him anything to know how he had lost her. Fate had played him a trick, a dastardly trick that nothing could undo now. There was nothing to do but resign the hopes that had buoyed him up for many months, realize that the game he had played was over, and that he had been the loser. His love turned to hate, his passion to a dastardly yearning for revenge upon the beautiful, high-spirited girl.

"The little black-eyed jade! How cleverly she gave me the slip! I would give anything on earth to be able to punish her," he muttered, wickedly, to himself.

He was walking slowly along the dusty road that wound along the banks of the river, and had already left the beautiful, extensive grounds of Eden some distance behind him. The sun was setting resplendently, gilding the beautiful river with gold, and a soft breeze fanned his hot brow; but the beauties of nature had no charm for his passion-seared soul. He walked on with lowering, moody brows, and did not look up until a cloud of dust blowing over him and the sound of approaching carriage wheels forced an impatient imprecation to his lips. Then he looked up, and the sight he beheld was photographed on his memory forever.

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An exquisite little phaeton—the daintiest, the most fairy-like he had ever beheld in his life—was approaching him, drawn by two superb white horses, whose smooth, satiny coats, gold-mounted harness, and azure bridle-reins glittered in the golden sunlight. Among the blue-satin cushions sat a lady and a gentleman, the latter a dark, handsome, prince-looking man, whom he recognized instantly as St. Leon Le Roy. Beside him sat a young beauty, in the daintiest Parisian bonnet and toilet, smiles on her lips, love in her eyes, peerless loveliness on the face lifted so tenderly to St. Leon's. Ross Powell gave one quick look into that beautiful face, and gasped, like

one dying:

"Laurel Vane!"

St. Leon saw the man trudging in the dust, and touched his hat courteously. Laurel saw him, and her young face whitened to the hue of death. Ross Powell did not return the gentleman's bow, did not move nor speak; he only stood still in the road, like one dazed, while the dazzling equipage whirled past him and covered him with dust.

The echoing sound of the wheels, that seemed to roll over his heart, died away; the dust-cloud slowly lowered and sunk to its kindred earth again. During those moments he had stood stock-still, like one dead, staring blindly before him. He roused himself now, shook himself like one awakened from a painful dream, and, turning, gazed down the road.

He was too late! The dainty equipage, with its daintier mistress and handsome master, had gone out of sight like a dream. He was alone in the golden glow of the beautiful sunset, the soft sound of the river in his ears, his heart on fire with the memory of that lovely face that had flashed on him suddenly like a star out of blackest night.

"Laurel Vane! And by St. Leon Le Roy's side! What does it mean?" he asked himself.

He went over in his mind every detail of the beautiful, happy face, the rich dress, the shining jewels she wore. Only the richest ladies in New York wore such things as these, he knew. Why did Laurel Vane have them? How came she to be sitting by St. Leon Le Roy's side—one of the proudest, richest men in the State?

He sat down on the grassy river bank, and tried to collect his thoughts. He was all at sea; he could not understand.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

There was no longer any fear that Mrs. Le Roy would die. She was better. She was rapidly convalescing.

St. Leon was very happy over her recovery.

He had not known how well he loved his mother until the dread of her loss hung over him. He had been sad and gloomy over the prospect of losing her. He was light-hearted and jubilant now over her convalescence.

Not the least of his happiness was that his mother, with all the fancifulness of an invalid, ascribed her recovery to her daughter-in-law's devoted care and nursing. She would not give any credit to the physicians who had exhausted the skill of the Esculapian art for her benefit. She declared that the paid nurses were a set of careless, neglectful dolts. She was quite sure that she must have perished among them but for the love and care of her son's wife.

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St. Leon and his wife both knew that the invalid was unjust to her faithful attendants, and that really they had done all they could to hasten her recovery. But they could not help being pleased and happy over her affectionate fiction; and, indeed, Laurel had devoted herself, with unsparing love and patience, to St. Leon's mother. When care and skill had failed, she had gone on her knees in prayer, though it often crossed her mind that, perhaps, God would not hear the pleadings of one who was herself living a dreadful lie of which she could not repent, because she was so blissfully happy that she could not realize the enormity of her sin.

But all doubt was over now. The gloomy shadow of the death-angel's wing no longer hung over Eden. The physicians declared that Mrs. Le Roy would live, and Mrs. Le Roy declared that her daughter-in-law had saved her life. No one gainsaid her, for they saw that the fancy made her happier, and St. Leon, if possible, loved his wife more passionately than before for her devotion to his mother.

When the long strain of fear and anxiety was over, they began to see that the faithful nurse had suffered somewhat in her tireless vigils by the couch of pain. She was thinner and paler, her eyes looked wide and dark and somber, just as they did when, almost a year ago, now, she had first come to Eden.

When St. Leon's terrible anxiety over his mother was dispelled, he began to be alarmed over his wife. It struck him that she was not looking well and scarcely happy.

"My darling, you have worn yourself out in tender cares for my mother," he said. "I have been selfish to allow it. But I did not think! You should have been more careful over yourself! But she is better now, and you must relegate the cares of the sick-room to others, while you go out with me and brighten your faded roses."

A strange mournful smile quivered over the beautiful face.

"I must not leave her yet," she said, "she would miss me so much. She loves me."

He could not understand the wistful pathos that trembled in the tone. He believed that her wearisome confinement to the sick-room had saddened her spirits.

"She loves you," he cried, catching her in his arms, and kissing the pale face until it glowed with tender blushes. "Who does not love you, my own, my peerless Beatrix? You are the queen of love

and beauty! I worship you as the lovely incarnation of all that is best and purest in your sex! And, deeply as I loved you before, I shall always love you better for your devotion to my mother!"

"Always?" she murmured, and again it seemed to him there was a ring of pathos that was almost pleading in the low, sweet voice. It confirmed him in his belief that she was saddened and overwrought by her wearisome confinement in the sick-chamber.

"Always, my darling. Can you doubt it?" he said, looking fondly into the wistful dark eyes, as he held her in his arms. [Pg 81]

"I will not doubt it. I will be happy as long as I can," she answered, with a sort of desperation.

That day when they sat by Mrs. Le Roy's couch together, she began herself to realize the change that had come over her son's wife. She missed the roses from the delicate cheeks, the brightness from the eyes, but most of all, the happy smile from the red lips. It even seemed to her that they had a wistful, pathetic droop.

"I have been selfish over my daughter," she said, repentantly. "She has broken herself down waiting on me. Beatrix, my darling, can you forgive me for being such a selfish, thoughtless old woman?"

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered. "I have not felt any weariness, and I have been only too happy to be with you and to care for you."

"You are a dear, unselfish child," cried Mrs. Le Roy, "but I don't intend to be so unreasonable again. You must leave me with the nurses now that I am better, and go out with your husband riding and driving again. I want to see the roses back in your face and the light in your eyes. And, St. Leon, you must write to the Gordons, and ask them to come and make us a visit."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, do not ask them," Laurel cried out with such sudden energy and passion that they were startled. Her face was deathly white with the shock she had received. They looked at her in surprise.

"My dear, I do not think you understood my mother," said her husband. "She wishes to invite your parents to visit you. Should you not be pleased to have them come?"

She saw that in her terror she had almost betrayed her horrible fear of the Gordons.

"I understood," she faltered. "I only meant—meant that it would be better not to ask them just yet, until your mother is better—until she is able to go out some. It would be pleasanter for all, would it not?"

They agreed with her that it would be pleasanter for all parties, but they did not want to tax her patience too much. It seemed only natural that she should be longing to see her mother.

"I might take you up to New York for a day or two," St. Leon suggested.

And again the beautiful face grew ghastly pale with fear and dread.

"No, I should not like that," she said, "I would prefer to have them come here. But let us wait a few days before we invite them."

She left them and went away to her own private room, locked the door, and threw herself down upon her couch in a perfect passion of dread and despair. The coils of fate were narrowing around her. She could not escape from the web her own hands had woven. A few hours or days at most, and then detection, shame, ignominy, perhaps banishment. The thought quivered like a sword-point in her heart.

"Will he forgive me, or will he send me away from him?" she asked herself, fearfully. [Pg 82]

She sat up and looked with dazed, heavy eyes at the elegance and luxury with which his love had surrounded her—at the diamonds on her hands, at her rich and costly robes—all mute tokens of the adoration in which he held her.

"He loves me so dearly, perhaps he will forgive me," she whispered to her beating heart. "I know if he had wronged me ever so bitterly, I should forgive him and love him still if he prayed me on his bended knees, as I shall do."

She pinned all her faith to the strength of his love and the power of that beauty on which he never wearied of gazing. She grew suddenly alarmed at the pallor of her face and the heaviness of her eyes. She thought that her beauty was deserting her, that potent charm by which she hoped to hold his heart when he found her out in her sin.

"I must go out, indeed," she cried to herself, in sudden terror; "I must get back my brightness and my color. I cannot afford to lose one charm that may hold my husband's heart!"

She forgot that he valued truth and honor more than mere physical loveliness—she forgot that he had scorned all womanhood for long years because one beautiful woman had been false to him. She could think of nothing but her anguished yearning not to lose her husband.

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

That day on which Ross Powell saw Laurel with her husband was the last of a series of happy walks and rides she had taken with St. Leon.

On that day that closed in so softly with the goldenest sunshine and tenderest twilight, that day seemed too fair for a day of fate, the suspended sword fell.

Yet she had never felt its shadow less than she did that day. She gave herself up blindly to her happiness, prizing it all the more because she knew it could not last. When she went to dress for her drive that evening she was most particular about her toilet. She chose a Parisian robe of cream and ruby colors, that was particularly becoming. Her bonnet was of creamy duchess lace, and its coronet of pale-pink rosebuds rested daintily against her rich golden waves of hair. The delicate lace at her throat was held by a gold bar set with pink coral and diamonds. Her boots and gloves were Parisian; her rose satin parasol shed a lovely glow over her pearl-fair complexion.

She was lovely as a dream, and she looked the dainty aristocrat from head to foot. St. Leon Le Roy said to himself with pardonable pride that he had won the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife.

She had never enjoyed a ride more than she did that afternoon. St. Leon had never been more tender and devoted. It was like heaven to look up into those dark, speaking eyes and read the love and adoration in his face. It filled her with a great passionate rapture and delight. She worshiped her noble husband with the blindest, most unreasoning passion woman's heart ever knew. In him she "lived and moved and had her being."

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She had forgotten for a little while the brooding shadow of the sword that hung ever over her head. The sunshine was reflected in her eyes, smiles were on her lips, when suddenly like a thunderbolt falling from a clear sky, the sight of Ross Powell's face came before her—that evil face which she both hated and dreaded, remembering how he had sworn to be revenged on her for her just womanly scorn.

In that moment the sun went out of her sky, the light went out of her life. She stifled the wail of dismay that rose to her lips, and sunk back among the satin cushions pale as death, her breath coming and going in great panting gasps, a mute terror in the depths of her wide, dark eyes.

He recognized her. She read that in the wonder and amaze that flashed over his face. What would he do? she asked herself. She almost expected to see him spring to her horses' heads, and, checking them with a grasp of his infuriated hands, charge her then and there with her sin.

He did nothing of the sort. He only stood and stared like a man turned to stone while they whirled past him. St. Leon touched his hat courteously, and in a moment it was all over. They had turned a bend in the road, and the man standing there, ignobly covered with the dust of their carriage-wheels, was out of sight.

St. Leon turned to his wife.

"It is your father's clerk—is it not?" he was saying; but he paused, stricken dumb by the sight of her face. He was startled and frightened. It was a moment before speech came to him. Then he cried out, in alarm: "Beatrix, my darling, what is it? You are as pale as a ghost. Are you ill?"

Her voice sounded faint and far-off, even to herself, as she answered him.

"I felt a sudden pain in my heart. Do not be alarmed, St. Leon. I shall recover in a moment."

He watched her anxiously, and he saw that she did not recover herself very fast. She tried hard to shake off the terrible weight that oppressed her heart, and to be her own natural self for the few last moments that were all that remained to her of the happiness that had been so perfect and so brief.

But she could not do it; she could not summon back the color to her face, the smiles to her lips, the brightness to her eyes. She could not still the wild, terrified beating of her heart. She felt a terrible choking sensation, like one dying. When she spoke, her voice had a strange sound even to herself.

Mr. Le Roy was frightened over his darling. He did not think of connecting her sudden seizure with the appearance of Ross Powell. He had forgotten the man's very existence in his anxiety.

When they reached home he almost carried her into the house in his arms. He brought wine to her with his own hands. It was only when he saw that it had revived her and made her better, that he left her to the care of the little be-ribboned French maid.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

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Mlle. Marie hovered around her mistress with many delicate attentions after her master had departed, but her ministrations were not crowned with much success. Laurel lay still and pale, but consumed by an agony of impatience, under the dabs of *eau de Cologne* that the maid bestowed on her cheeks and forehead. She longed to be alone to weep and wail aloud in her despair, but she could not send the maid away. She knew that she had to dress for dinner in a little while, and as Mrs. Le Roy would be down to dinner for the first time that day, her absence would be felt as a great disappointment. She would not give up. She would keep up the farce to the last moment.

She lay there, outwardly still and calm, but consumed by a burning suspense and unrest, her hearing strained to its utmost, as if waiting to hear her accuser's voice. She wondered if Ross

Powell would follow her, and denounce her. Surely he knew her secret now. She could hide it from him no longer. In a little while he must know all.

Once, a wild impulse of flight came over her. How could she stay and meet her husband's scorn when he learned the truth? He worshiped her now as his ideal of womanhood. What would he say when he knew her as she was, weak and willful, a girl who had risked everything for the sake of love? Would he hate her for her sin? That would be more bitter than death. Perhaps it were better to go away now before he knew her at her worst, before he hated her for deceiving him.

If she had guessed what lay before her, she would have gone—she would have fled silently from Eden, bearing with her for the light of her darkened future the memory of his love alone—his smiles, his caresses, his tender words—but the madness of her love made her stay.

"I cannot go. All is not lost yet," she said, faintly, yet hopefully, to her foreboding heart. "He will forgive me, perhaps, for our love's sake."

She knew that there could be no limit to her love and forgiveness for her husband if he had wronged her. Was it strange that she should judge him by herself? She was very young and very ignorant. She did not know how truthfully the poet had written:

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,  
'Tis woman's whole existence."

When she was dressed for dinner, St. Leon came to take her down. There was a subdued happiness and excitement shining on his handsome face; she wondered at it, but she did not ask him why.

She was dressed much as she had been on the night when he first told her that he loved her. She wore white, with scarlet, jacqueminot roses. She had chosen the costume purposely, thinking he would be softened at the memories it recalled.

He took his fair young wife into his arms, and kissed her many times; he smoothed the waving, golden tresses with loving hands, telling her how dearly he loved her—how happy she made him. Then, even while she clung to him, he released her gently from his embrace, not knowing it was the last—not dreaming of the years to come, when his arms would ache in vain to clasp her.

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"My mother is waiting for you in the drawing-room," he said. "There is some one with her—a visitor. Can you guess whom, darling?"

She gave a terrible start—a smothered cry—and clung to his arm with both small, white hands.

"My dear, how nervous you are!" he said. "One would think you were frightened. It is your old rival, Maud Merivale. Think of her insufferable impertinence in coming here after that night last summer! But courage, love, she will only be consumed with envy when she sees how much lovelier you have grown since you became my wife."

She tried to murmur some careless reply, but her heart leaped with fear. Another enemy! Too surely the coils of fate were closing round her!

They went down the broad staircase, along the lighted hall, and so into the brilliant drawing-room, the handsome man with the lovely girl borne proudly on his arm. She looked up and saw Mrs. Le Roy smiling at her, Mrs. Merivale rustling toward her in "gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls," and, beyond her, two others—a man and a woman—both strangers. They were rising eagerly, too, coming toward her with smiles and outstretched hands. A dim perception flashed over Laurel; her heart felt like a stone in her breast.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX.

It was a supreme moment. Laurel felt it to be such. Her heart beat, her limbs trembled beneath her. But for the support of St. Leon's arm she must have fallen to the earth. She wondered that she did not faint—rather that she did not die—for an intuition, swift as the lightning's flash, told her that these two strangers were Mr. Gordon and his wife.

She had never seen them in her life; but she did not for one moment doubt their identity. She saw Mrs. Merivale modestly giving place to them, allowing them to greet her first; she saw the smile of pleasure on St. Leon's lips—St. Leon, who thought she was having such a pleasant surprise. She could not move nor speak. She clung desperately to St. Leon's arm, and they came nearer and nearer, the tall, rather stern-looking man, and the pretty, faded blonde in her rich silks and laces. Laurel gazed at them with her great, dark, frightened eyes, much as the little princes in the Tower might have gazed upon their murderers.

A great horror grew upon her as if, indeed, they were about to strike her dead. She had been caught in a horrible trap—a pit of destruction yawned beneath her feet—in a moment she would be hurled down, down, down, into fathomless darkness and despair.

Mrs. Gordon drew nearer and nearer. There was a tender smile on the fair, delicate face, and the blue eyes looked straight into Laurel's own for an instant—only an instant, for then she started backward, and her cry of dismay and wonder pealed on the impostor's ears like the knell of doom.

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"Beatrix! Oh, my God, it is not Beatrix! What does this mean?"

"It is not Beatrix!" Mr. Gordon echoed, blankly.

And for a moment there reigned a terrible silence in the room.

St. Leon Le Roy looked down at his wife. She was clinging to his arm with the desperation of despair. Her face was pale as death, and convulsed with fear. Her wide, frightened, dark eyes stared up straight into his, with a hunted look in their somber depth that pierced his heart.

"Beatrix, what do they mean?" he cried. "Have they all gone mad?"

Her white lips tried to syllable the word "mad," but it died upon them in a straining gasp.

Mr. Gordon came slowly forward, a dazed expression on his features.

"Mr. Le Roy, there must be some mistake," he said. "This lady is not your wife?"

St. Leon answered gravely:

"There is no mistake. This is my wife, Mr. Gordon."

Mrs. Gordon cried out, startingly:

"Then where is our daughter?"

She looked ready to faint. Her limbs tottered beneath her. She clung to her husband with one hand pressed upon her throbbing heart, and stared at the lovely creature on St. Leon's arm as if she were a ghost. Mrs. Le Roy, still pale and wan from her recent illness, rose from the couch where she reclined and tottered to her side.

"My dear friends, have you all taken leave of your senses?" she cried. "Have you forgotten your own daughter's face? Beatrix, darling, why do you not come to your mother?"

Only a stifled moan came from Laurel's lips, but Mrs. Gordon answered, sternly:

"This is no daughter of ours. We have never seen her face before to-night!"

And Mrs. Merivale, in the background, gazed in gloating wonder and triumph at the pale, horrified face of St. Leon's wife. She was burning with anxiety to hear the *dénouement* of this strange and startling scene.

"This is no daughter of ours. We have never seen her face before to-night," repeated Mr. Gordon, and his wife feebly reiterated his words.

"You have gone mad—both of you," Mrs. Le Roy cried out, fretfully. "This is your daughter whom you sent to us, and whom my son married. How dare you deny it? Speak to them, St. Leon—speak to them, Beatrix. Do not let them deny you! It is monstrous, it is terrible!"

"She is no child of ours. She will not claim to be. She is a miserable impostor. Look at her guilty face," said Mr. Gordon, pointing a scornful finger at the white face that did indeed look shame-stricken and full of guilty woe.

St. Leon had never taken his eyes from that beautiful, terrified face. He spoke to her now, and his voice sounded hollow and stern.

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"Beatrix, what do they mean? Is it true that you are not Mr. Gordon's daughter?"

The white hands slipped from his arm, and she fell on her knees before him, lifting up her woful white face pleadingly.

"Oh, St. Leon, pity and forgive me," she moaned, appealingly. "It is true, and I have bitterly deceived you. I am not Beatrix Gordon!"

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## CHAPTER XL.

A silence like death fell for a moment on the group that closed around that pathetic kneeling figure with its white uplifted face and streaming golden hair. St. Leon's voice broke it first—hoarse and terribly stern:

"If you are not Beatrix Gordon, for God's sake tell us *who* you are?"

And she answered in a voice shaken by blended triumph and despair:

"I am your wife, St. Leon. Do not forget that."

Mrs. Gordon, springing forward, shook her wildly by the arm.

"Look at me, girl," she cried. "What have you done with my daughter, my blue-eyed Beatrix? Why are you here in her place?"

The great dark eyes, heavy with despair, turned slowly on her face.

"You are her mother?" she said.

"Yes, I am her mother," Mrs. Gordon answered, impatiently. "Tell me, girl, what have you done with my darling?"

And Laurel answered in a tone of the most pathetic wonder and reproach:

"You are her mother, and yet you did not love her enough to make her happy. You forget that 'love is lord of all.' Oh, why did not you let her be happy in her own fashion? Then all this need not have happened!"

"You drive me mad with your strange answers," wailed Mrs. Gordon. "Will no one make her speak and tell me my child's fate?"

She looked around helplessly into their wondering faces. St. Leon stood white and moveless as a marble statue, his arms folded tightly over his broad breast, his pale brow beaded with chilly drops of sweat, his eyes never turning from that kneeling figure. Mrs. Le Roy, overcome with agitation, had sunk upon her sofa gasping for breath. Maud Merivale gazed on the scene with a face of evil joy, and Mr. Gordon looked dazed, like one staggering under a horrible burden, but at his wife's piteous appeal he went slowly forward, and touched the arm of the convicted impostor.

"You hear," he said, "you are driving us mad with your evasions! Where is my daughter? Is she dead?"

A shudder ran through them all at that ominous word, but Laurel sprung to her feet suddenly, and faced him with an almost defiant gleam in her eyes. A dull red glow flared into her cheeks, and she drew her graceful figure haughtily erect as she extended one slender hand at the agitated speaker.

"Do you think that I have murdered her that you look at me so fiercely?" she cried. "Do you think I would harm one hair of her lovely golden head—she who was so kind to me in my desolation and despair? No, no, she is not dead, your daughter whom you tried to separate from her own true lover. She is well and happy. She is married to Cyril Wentworth, and gone abroad with him!"

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"Married!" almost shrieked Mrs. Gordon, and her husband echoed, blankly, "Married!"

"Yes, she is married," Laurel answered, almost triumphantly. "She took her fate into her own hands, and sought happiness with her lover."

"Married to Cyril Wentworth! How dared she? how dared she?" Mrs. Gordon wailed aloud, in frantic anger.

And Laurel looking at her gravely, answered with unconscious pathos:

"Women dare everything for love's sake, you know, Mrs. Gordon."

The chagrined, disappointed mother broke into low, hysterical sobs and tears. Mr. Gordon drew her gently to his side, and turned his cold, stern gaze upon Laurel.

"And you—how came you here in Beatrix's place?" he asked.

"She sent me here," Laurel answered. "She had been kind to me, and I paid my debt of gratitude by taking her place here while she went away and married Mr. Wentworth."

She felt their eyes burning upon her as she spoke. She knew that they hated her for what she had done. She felt a dim, passing wonder how she could stand there and bear it. She wondered that she did not scream out aloud or fall down dead at their feet. But a strange mechanical calmness upheld her through it all.

"This is the strangest story I ever heard," said Mr. Gordon. "Can it be that Beatrix lent herself to such a plot? Tell me all about it."

"There is almost nothing to tell beyond what I have told you," she said. "She despaired of ever winning your consent to her marriage, and she could not give up her lover. So she sent me here with Clarice to act a part, while she married her lover! Then they kept it secret while they waited for Mr. Wentworth's promised European appointment. When he received it, she went abroad with him. I saw her myself in London. She is perfectly happy, only for her longing to be forgiven by her parents."

"I will never forgive her—the false, deceitful jade!" he uttered, fiercely.

She turned to him pleadingly.

"Do not be hard upon your beautiful daughter," she prayed. "She loved him so dearly, she could not live without him. Oh, you must forgive her!"

"Never, never!" Mrs. Gordon sobbed, bitterly.

Vain, proud, ambitious woman as she was, her heart was almost broken by this terrible shock.

Mr. Gordon's voice broke scornfully upon Laurel's tumultuous thoughts.

"And this dutiful daughter of mine, did she add to her iniquities by arranging a marriage for you? Did she teach you to deceive this honorable gentleman and trap him into a marriage with a wretched impostor?"

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The harsh words struck her like the stinging cut of a lash. She shivered and dropped her eyes, but she did not flinch from answering him. A marvelous bravery upheld her while she confessed her fault and exonerated Beatrix.

"Mine is the fault," she said. "If your daughter had suspected the madness that filled me, she would have betrayed me—she would never have tolerated it for one hour. She wished me to go abroad with her; she did not dream of the truth. But I—I sent Clarice back to her, and I stayed on at Eden. The fault is mine; the consequences," her voice faltered almost to a moan, "be upon my own head."

St. Leon had never yet spoken a word. Pale, statue-like, he stood, his hearing strained to catch every word that fell from the lips of his wife—his wife, whom he had believed to be an angel, but whom he now knew as a false and reckless woman who had stolen into his home and heart under a lying guise.

"And you," said Mr. Gordon, sternly—"who are you that have dared do this terrible wrong? What is your name? Whence came you?"

She turned suddenly and lifted her dark, anguished eyes to her husband's face in mute wonder and entreaty. In its lightning scorn, its terrible indignation, she read her doom. With a moan of despair she let the long, dark lashes fall until they shaded her burning cheeks and answered Mr. Gordon:

"Do not ask me my name nor my history. What can it matter to you who hate me? My heart is broken. Let me shroud myself in merciful mystery."

"You refuse to disclose your identity?" said Mr. Gordon, wonderingly.

"I refuse," she answered, with a reckless defiance born of despair.

And at that moment a mocking laugh, cruel as a fiend's, rang startlingly through the splendid room.

Every eye turned toward the sound. Through the wide lace curtains that shaded the low French windows a man stepped into the room—Ross Powell!

Laurel saw him, and a shriek of despair rose from her lips at the sight of her enemy's evil, triumphant face. She covered her face with her trembling hands and sunk down upon the floor, crouching like a guilty creature from the angry judges surrounding her.

Ross Powell went forward to his employer, Mr. Gordon.

"Sir," he said, respectfully, "you wish to know the name of this matchless hypocrite and deceiver. I can soon enlighten you."

"Speak, then," Mr. Gordon answered, quickly, gazing at his clerk in surprise and wonder.

"You remember Vane, the drunken writer, who died almost a year ago?" said Ross Powell brutally.

"Yes; but what has Louis Vane to do with this mysterious girl?" inquired Mr. Gordon, bluntly.

"Everything," answered the villain, sarcastically, "for this fine lady—the mistress of Eden—is old Vane's daughter!"

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Gordon, astonished.

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"Yes," triumphantly. "Her name is Laurel Vane, and she belonged to me. She was promised to me, but when her tippling father drank himself to death, she ran away, and, though I have been on her track ever since, I could never find her until to-night. And no wonder; for, with her humble antecedents, I never dreamed of looking for my runaway sweetheart in the wife of the aristocratic Mr. Le Roy!"

Slow, cold, stinging, every word fell on Laurel's heart like a drop of ice. She sprung to her feet and faced him, her dark eyes blazing with scorn and wrath.

"Yes, I am Laurel Vane. That is true," she cried; "but every other word you have uttered, Ross Powell, is a base and cruel lie! I never belonged to you; I have never seen you but once or twice in my life, and then I feared and hated you as one hates the slimy, crawling serpent! I have never belonged to any man but Mr. Le Roy."

"After the terrible way in which you have deceived Mr. Le Roy, you will not find him willing to believe your later assertions," sneered the wretch.

The wretched young creature turned again and looked at her husband, but he still preserved his quiet, statue-like position, his arms folded over, his lips set in a thin, hard line, his eyes blazing with a gloomy, lurid fire beneath the broad, massive brow that was beaded with great, chilly drops of dew. It was the darkest hour of his life. His humiliation was almost greater than he could bear. There was no tenderness, no pity in his somber gaze as it met the wild, appealing eyes of the girl who had deceived him.

But she went to him, she stood humbly and suppliantly before him, her face lighted with passionate love and appeal, upheld by the strength of her girlish will, longing to be forgiven for her sin and taken to his heart again.

"St. Leon, he speaks falsely," she said. "I never belonged to him. I never saw him until after my father's death, and then he basely insulted my helplessness and poverty. In my anger I struck him in the face, and he swore revenge for the blow. You see how he takes it in vilifying my name. Do not listen to him, my husband. I have never loved but you, never belonged to any one but you. I deceived you in the one thing only. Will you not believe me?"

His stern lips parted to answer her, but Maud Merivale rushed forward and shook him violently by the arm.

"St. Leon, look to your mother," she cried. "She has fainted."

He turned and looked, and saw that it was true. Without a word to Laurel he rushed to her aid.

Mrs. Merivale caught the unhappy wife rudely by the arm; she looked down into the dark,

anguished eyes, and laughed low and mockingly.

"You see how he scorns you," she said, in tones of bitter triumph. "Your reign is over, impostor! Your sin has found you out. He will drive you away in loathing and contempt. Ah, I am revenged now before I even lifted a finger to punish you. Did I not warn you—'who breaks—pays'?"

Laurel had no words to answer her. Her brave heart had failed her. She slipped from her enemy's vindictive grasp and fell like a log heavily to the floor.

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## CHAPTER XLI.

St. Leon lifted his mother's senseless form, and bore her away to her room. Mrs. Gordon lay weeping, moaning, and wildly lamenting in her husband's arms. Ross Powell, having accomplished his wicked work, and finding himself unnoticed, stole quietly away from the scene of his villainy. No one seemed to heed the prostrate form, lying prone upon the floor like one dead, the marble-white face, with its closed eyes and night-black lashes, upturned to the light—no one save Mrs. Merivale, and she actually spurned it with her dainty foot, and glared upon it with envenomed hatred in her turquoise-blue eyes.

"The little viper!" she muttered, bitterly. "Oh, that I had known the truth when I was here last summer! How I should have exulted in betraying her to my haughty lord who laughed at my love, and scorned me because once I was false to the trust he placed in me! She was an angel forsooth. Ha! ha! I would not have missed this rich scene for ten thousand dollars. What has become of that man who came so opportunely upon the scene? I must see him. It may be worth my while."

She cast a glance of hate and scorn upon Laurel's silent, recumbent figure, then hastened to the window and glided out, the heavy curtains of silk and lace falling noiselessly together behind her retreating form. The great gilded drawing-room, with its brilliant chandeliers and myriad flowers, was deserted now save for the half frantic Gordons and the unconscious girl upon the floor.

Unnoticed and deserted she struggled back to life and found herself alone save for those two who gazed upon her with reproach and hatred as the cause of their desolation. She had lent herself to the plot to rob them of their daughter, and they could not forgive her any more than they could forgive Beatrix for her unfilial desertion.

But she went and stood before them, so beautiful in her sorrow and despair, with her disheveled golden tresses and the red roses dying on her breast, that they could almost have pitied her in her tender youth and grief, if only she had not helped Beatrix to her happiness, and spoiled their clever scheme for separating her from her handsome, penniless lover.

"I have wronged you," she said, sadly. "I know that. But, believe me, I could not help it. She—your daughter—had been kind to me, and I promised her my eternal gratitude. When she claimed my promise, what could I do but yield! And—and—she is very happy. You must not forget that when you think of her. Perhaps you may forgive me when you know that she is so perfectly happy."

"Forgive!" they uttered, scornfully, for the thought that Beatrix was happy in her stolen marriage was like a thorn in the flesh to them. They felt hard and vindictive toward their beautiful, willful child. They would have been glad to hear that she was ill, unhappy, repentant, starving, even—anything but happy.

"You will forgive me, and forgive her?" pleaded the hapless girl.

"Never!" they answered, harshly, hardening their hearts against the two young creatures who had carried out that daring conspiracy.

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And Laurel began to realize the enormity of what she had done. It had not seemed so bad to her at first, this helping a fair young girl and her lover to be happy in spite of opposition. She remembered that Clarice had called it a splendid joke, and Beatrix had laughed at her scruples. But it was quite another thing to the Gordons. It was a cruel outrage, and beyond pardon.

She stood looking at their cold, frowning faces a moment, then turned hopelessly away. Every one was against her. If only St. Leon would forgive her she would not care for the rest, she thought; but, alas—

"His love is turned to hate," she sighed. "He will never forgive me. He will drive me away from him into eternal banishment. My brief dream of happiness is over. And yet I was mad enough to think that out of his great love he would forgive me! Ah, me! ah, me!"

Mr. Gordon led his wife silently from the room without a glance at her. She was alone in the great, gilded drawing-room—deserted and alone in her terrible anguish and despair. The sting of their contempt pierced her heart.

"I am despised and deserted by all," she said, sorrowfully. "What shall I do? Must I go away? Would St. Leon like it? Would he be glad never to see me again?"

Something like a wail of anguish came from her lips at the thought of leaving her husband and never seeing him again. It was more bitter than death. She thought of his passionate, idolizing love. Had it all been murdered at one fell stroke by the knowledge of her sin?

The door opened, and he came suddenly into the room.

He saw her standing there, the only creature in the wide, brilliant drawing-room. He knew that

every one had deserted her for her sin—that fatal retribution had overtaken her. His own heart had revolted from its allegiance, now that he knew her for the willful creature of clay that she was instead of the angel he had deemed her. Yet never had her perfect beauty struck him more forcibly than now. Robbed of its light, its coloring, its bloom, its perfection still showed supreme, like the beauty of a perfectly chiseled statue.

She ran to him; she threw herself humbly at his feet—

"There, with her milk-white arms and shadowy hair,  
She made her face a darkness."

"Forgive me, my husband, forgive me!" prayed the wretched wife.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

He stood there in silence, looking down at that bowed head, veiled by its sweeping golden hair. He made no effort to raise her; he answered not a word to her wild appeal. There was a smoldering fire in his dark eyes, a stern compression of his lips, that boded ill for the granting of her prayer.

He had received a terrible shock. His love and his pride alike had been outraged, and in his case it was a strong love and a strong pride. The wound to both was accordingly all the greater. [Pg 93]

His strange silence grew terrible to her. She lifted her face a little and looked at him, recoiling from the terrible indignation in his eyes as if he had struck her a blow.

"St. Leon, speak to me," she wailed. "Oh, you will not be hard and unforgiving to me! I have wronged you and deceived you, I know; but it was all because I loved you. No woman ever loved with so mad a love as I have given you. If I had not loved you so dearly, I had not dared so much."

He spoke then. There was concentrated passion, burning contempt, in his deep and angry voice.

"Do not speak of love!" he said. "I can fancy with what love the drunken journalist's daughter, the poor clerk's runaway *fiancé*, could love St. Leon Le Roy. I can imagine that the temptation to lift yourself to my level from the dust where you groveled was too strong for you. I can fancy that the greed for wealth and honor led you astray. But love—faugh! If one spark of that divine passion had burned in your scheming breast, you would have respected the unsullied honor, the proud old name of the Le Roys—you would have spared me the disgraceful alliance with a drunkard's daughter!"

Slow, cruel, bitter, every word fell like a coal of fire on her bleeding heart. Was it the gifted father, the brilliant genius whom she had loved and revered despite his weakness, who was thus stigmatized as a drunkard by her husband's lips? Had that father's sin indeed set her apart as a mark for the finger of scorn to point at, a creature too low to even lift her eyes to the proud and rich St. Leon Le Roy? It was a cruel, a bitter insult. It rankled like a sword point in her heart.

She rose slowly to her feet and faced him with a strange, new-born dignity that sat gracefully on her perfect beauty. She did not speak, but waited with drooping head and tightly folded hands for his further words.

They came, still further blighting the sad young heart:

"There can be no talk of forgiveness between you and me. You have injured me beyond reparation. You can be nothing to me henceforth."

"You will send me away from you—you will divorce me?" she asked, with a shiver.

"No, I will have no scandal. I will not drag the proud name of Le Roy through the mire of a divorce court. That for which you schemed so craftily shall not be taken away from you. I shall go away and leave you at Eden in the enjoyment of the wealth and the name you have won. Then our tacit separation and divorce will be accomplished. I shall never willingly look upon your beautiful, false face again!"

She bowed her head in speechless acquiescence. Where were the wild words, the matchless eloquence with which she meant to plead her cause, to implore for pardon when this dark hour came upon her? That love and beauty which she had deemed such powerful agents to hold his heart and win his clemency, of what avail were they now? His icy scorn, his proud, decisive, determination left no room for dissent or appeal. The terrible weight of her sin had fallen upon her and crushed her. [Pg 94]

"I think you understand me," he said. "The wife I loved is as one dead to me. She never existed save in my imagination. You must accept this as your punishment, if indeed you can feel any remorse for your falsehood and deceit. Now go to your room and let your maid attend you there. I presume you will not care to meet our guests again. I am quite sure they will not wish to see you. Remain in seclusion. To-morrow I will make all needful arrangements for our separation, and they shall be duly communicated to you."

She lifted her head and gave one long, grave look from her heavy, somber eyes at the handsome, haughty face, bowed slowly, and went out of the room. The slow swish of her trailing satin robe echoed drearily in his hearing as he stood there pale and statue-like, but he did not turn his head

for one farewell glance at the girl who was his wife and who had so terribly deceived him.

She went to her room and sunk down wearily upon her sofa. Marie the maid came in presently. Her face showed that she knew all.

"Marie," she said, "go and ask Mrs. Le Roy if she will permit me to come to her for a few moments."

The maid returned in a moment.

"Mr. Le Roy is with his mother. He desires that you will not disturb her," she said.

Laurel answered quietly.

"You may go away, and leave me now, Marie, I wish to be alone for awhile."

When the maid had gone she went to the window, drew back the rich curtains of silk and lace and gazed out upon the scene. Night had fallen—the beautiful moonlit summer night. The perfume of roses and honeysuckles came floating heavily on the soft air, the wide expanse of the Hudson shone like a silver sea.

"I must go away from Eden," said the girl-wife to herself, drearily. "What shall I do with my empty, ruined life?"

Strangely enough there came to her a memory of the day she had first met St. Leon Le Roy—the questions she had asked him and his strange reply:

"I believe I should throw myself into yonder beautiful river and so end all," he had said.

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## CHAPTER XLIII.

Mlle. Marie was very glad to get away from attendance on her mistress for a few hours. There is nothing happens in the parlor, but is immediately communicated to the kitchen, so the *dénouement* in high life had immediately become the sensation in low life below stairs. The maid was eager to join the gossips.

So Laurel remained alone and undisturbed in the elegant rooms, where she had spent such happy hours with the husband who now disowned and abandoned her. She stared out into the beautiful summer night with dark, inscrutable eyes, trying dimly to pierce the veil that hid the future from her aching sight.

St. Leon Le Roy remained in attendance on his mother. The poor lady, in her weak, enfeebled state, had sustained a terrible shock. She had fallen from one fainting spell to another, and the nurse and her son remained constantly by her side. At length she recovered her reason, and was given a composing draught. She fell into a light slumber, and St. Leon stole away and consummated that fatal interview with his wife, then returned to watch by the invalid's couch.

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He did not intend to deny his wife an interview with his mother, though he did not think it would avail her anything, believing that she would take sides with himself against the wife who had so bitterly deceived him. He did not think it prudent to allow a meeting between them that night, so when Marie came he returned the curt message that swept the last hope from Laurel's heart, and, as it seemed, the last plank from between her and despair.

Mrs. Le Roy slumbered fitfully until midnight. St. Leon sent the nurse to the lounge in the dressing-room, and kept vigil himself by the sick-bed, looking more like a statue than a man, as he sat there in the shaded night-light, pale and moveless, as if carved in marble; his lips compressed sternly, a smoldering fire burning in his veiled, dark eyes. His mind was busy with thought and memory. He was going over, step by step, his acquaintance with the false Beatrix Gordon from the day when she had first stood, shy and frightened in the doorway of Eden, until to-night. He held the key now to many a subtle enigma that had puzzled him in those past days.

"So fair, so young, and seemingly so ignorant of the world, and yet so false," he said to himself. "False to her lover, Ross Powell, first, then doubly false in wedding me in borrowed plumes. There is no faith nor truth in woman. They are bad and mercenary to the core—all of them, except my honored mother. Yet my wife has the face of an angel. Who would have believed that the greed of gold could have tempted her to such a sin!"

Mrs. Le Roy stirred and opened her eyes. They rested wistfully on the stern, impassive face of her son.

"Your wife, St. Leon," she said, faintly. "Have you forgiven her?"

"Could there be any forgiveness for such falsity as hers, mother?" he asked, turning sternly toward her.

A sigh breathed over Mrs. Le Roy's lips.

"She was such a child," she said, plaintively, almost excusingly. "Have you given her any chance to exculpate herself, my son?"

"Could any exculpation be acceptable?" he asked again, sternly.

"Where is she? What has been done to her?" she asked, anxiously.

He told her his decision, told her all that he had said to his wife in his outraged pride and wrath.

She was weeping bitterly when he had finished.

"Mother, surely you do not blame me and excuse her," he said, wonderingly. "I had no thought but that you would take my part against her."

"I must see her first," she said, almost angrily in her deep earnestness. "I cannot condemn her unheard. You will let me see the child, St. Leon?" [Pg 96]

"Of course," he answered, impatiently. "You do not suppose I would deny any wish of that kind you choose to express, mother. But to-night you are too ill and nervous. You will wait until to-morrow."

"Oh, my son, do not be angry with me—I cannot wait. Send her to me now," she wept.

"I am quite sure you had better wait until to-morrow," he began, but at that moment Mlle. Marie pushed open the door and looked in with a pale, frightened face.

"Is Mrs. Le Roy here?" she asked. "Because she is not in her room, and I cannot find her anywhere."

"St. Leon, you have driven her away," his mother cried out, wildly.

He sprung to his feet in dismay.

"No, no," he said, quickly. "Do not think such a thing, mother. Stay here, Marie, I will go and find her if she can be found. She is not far, of course."

But all the same a hand of ice seemed to grip his heart as he hurried from the room.

She was gone—the dark-eyed bride whom he had loved so well, and who had so fatally deceived him. While Marie gossiped with her familiars she had quietly stolen away. A little, tear-blotted note lay on her dressing-table.

"I have gone away, my husband," it said. "I shall never trouble your peace again. Perhaps when I am dead you will forgive me for having loved you, 'not wisely, but too well.'"

And to the pathetic note she had simply signed the despised name of "Laurel Vane."

The white satin dress, the withered crimson roses, lay on the dressing-room floor; the jewels she had worn, some costly sparkling rubies, on her dressing-table, beside the little note. A simple walking-dress and close hat and veil were gone from her wardrobe; but the next morning the dark-blue veil and a pair of pretty dark kid gloves, with the dimpled impress of her hand still in them, were found upon the river bank close to the greedy gurgling waves. They suggested a horrible possibility to every one.

And one week later a mutilated unrecognizable body was washed upon the shore near Eden. The face was defaced beyond recognition; but the golden hair, the dark dress, the dainty linen, were like Laurel's. No one doubted that the despairing wife had sought oblivion from her woes in the deep, swirling river. If St. Leon forgave her now for her sin, he made no sign. He remained silent, grave, inscrutable. But the waif from the river was buried quietly in the Le Roy vault, with all the honors due to his wife. He shed no tears, he spoke no word of the feelings that held sway within him. The separation of death was no wider than he had meant should exist in life.

But Mrs. Le Roy was inconsolable. She wept bitterly for the daughter-in-law who had so deceived her. She forgave her for her sin, because she was so young and had loved St. Leon so dearly. And there was another reason, which one day, through her bitter lamentations, she revealed to St. Leon. [Pg 97]

"You must have forgiven her if you had known it, St. Leon," she said. "But she was so shy and she had only known it a little while herself. She told me first, and I was so happy over the news! There was soon to be a little heir to Eden."

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## CHAPTER XLIV.

Laurel had left her veil and gloves on the bank of the river with a deliberate purpose.

She desired that her angry, unforgiving husband should believe that she was dead. Since he had deliberately planned to put her out of his life forever, he would, no doubt, be glad to think that she was dead. So, with a heart full of bitterness and wounded love, she had penned that pathetic note to him and gone away.

All her trembling hopes were over now. She knew the worst. St. Leon would never forgive her for the deceit by which she had made herself his wife. He had forgotten his love; indeed, she did not doubt but that he hated her now, and believed Ross Powell's shameless lie against her. Mrs. Le Roy, too, had declined to see her. Of course she took sides with her son. The poor child had not one friend to turn to in her despair.

Her heart beat, her face burned at the thought of the ignominious separation her husband had planned. What did she care for Eden, for the wealth he had sneeringly said she should not be deprived of, now that she had lost him? All the latent pride within her rose in arms against such terrible humiliation. She would have died, indeed, would have faced the crudest death unflinchingly, rather than have remained at Eden on such terms. Laurel had been a passionate, loving, impulsive child till now. In the hour of her unutterable desolation, she became a proud,

cold, blighted woman. Her sin had found her out. That time of which she had spoken to Beatrix Wentworth and Clarice, saying that only when it came could she repent of her fault, had come, and, metaphorically speaking, she wore sack-cloth and ashes.

Death would have been welcome in that hour. She longed for it, she prayed for it. It seemed to her quite impossible that she could lose St. Leon and live. She had told herself often and often that, if he refused to forgive her when he found her out, she should die. It had seemed to her that her heart would stop its beating, her pulses faint and fail in that terrible hour.

But the end had come, and the blood still pulsed through her veins, her heart still beat, the young, strong life that thrilled her held on its steady course. A great temptation came over her as she crouched in the night and the darkness on the banks of the swirling river. It would have been so pleasant, so sweet, to have ended the short, sad story of her life, with its terrible temptation and cruel failure, then and there—to have shut out the dark, foreboding future in the merciful shadows of oblivion, but something—perhaps that tender secret she had so shyly withheld from her husband—held her back from the fatal plunge. Her own life she might have taken in the frenzy of despair, but that other tenderer one throbbing beneath her broken heart, she could not, she dared not.

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"I have no right," she said to herself. "I might be wicked and mad enough to commit suicide, but murder, never. No, no, I will be brave. I will bear my cross for the sake of what is coming to me. Who knows but that it may comfort me in my lonely future! St. Leon will not want it. He would hate it and exile it from him as he did me. It will be wholly mine—something of his that will love me and cling to me although he scorns and despises me."

So she went away. She took with her none of the jewels, none of the beautiful gifts her adoring husband had lavished upon her in the happy days now forever past. She slipped her purse into her pocket. It contained several hundred dollars. Pride would have made her leave it, but she felt that for the sake of her tender secret she had a right to take it with her. She would need it in the trial that lay before her.

So she left the veil and gloves upon the river bank where they would find them if they sought for her, and then she went to New York and hid herself and her sorrow in the obscurity of the great, thronged city, bearing her burden of sorrow alone and in pitiful silence and despair.

Through the medium of the omnipresent newspaper she learned of the tragedy that had occurred at Eden. As if it had been the story of another she went over the fate of the beautiful impostor who had been detected in her sin, and whose disappearance had been followed by the finding of her drowned body. Then, indeed, she started, wondering who the unfortunate river waif could have been who had been buried with the honors pertaining to St. Leon Le Roy's young wife.

"I will not undeceive them," she said. "Now, indeed, I am dead to him forever, and that is best. Let him forget me."

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## CHAPTER XLV.

Alone and without references, Laurel did not find it easy to secure respectable lodgings in the city. She thought of returning to the house where she had lived with her father, but a wholesome dread of her base enemy, Ross Powell, held her back. She did not think it would be prudent to venture into that vicinity, so she went to a far-removed portion of the city, where she only secured the cheap and decent lodgings she desired by the payment of several months in advance. She was very well pleased to do this, for she had made up her mind to remain in this quiet, obscure locality until her trial was over. To her curious landlady she called herself Mrs. Vane, and said that she was a widow.

As she had left all her clothing at Eden, Laurel found herself compelled to draw again upon her small hoard of money. In accordance with her *rôle* of a widow, she bought only black dresses, and these of a cheap and simple kind. She put back her rich, golden hair under an ugly widow's cap, and never ventured into the street without a thick crape veil drawn closely over her face. She did not feel that she was acting a falsehood in doing this. She said to herself that she was worse than widowed. She had been most cruelly put away from her husband's heart for a sin that he ought to have forgiven because she had loved him so dearly and had been tempted so much beyond her power of resistance.

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A strange cold bitterness began to grow up in her desolate young heart toward him. She called him hard and cold and unloving in her thoughts, because measured by her own passionate love his affection fell so far below the standard where she would have placed it. Laurel was all unversed in the lore of the world. She knew nothing of the difference between male and female love. She had never heard that couplet so wonderfully true that use has worn it threadbare:

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,  
'Tis woman's whole existence."

She did not know this—no one had ever told her so, and she was fated to learn it in the hardest fashion by cruel experience. She was learning, too, in all their subtle pathos the truth of those mournful lines:



"Alas! the love of women, it is known  
To be a lovely and a fearful thing,  
For all of theirs upon the die is thrown,  
And if 'tis lost life has no more to bring."

Those were sad and heavy days that followed on her flitting to New York. She was almost crazed with the bitterness of her despair. There were weeks that were afterward almost a blank to her because she spent them in tears that were like drops of blood wrung from her aching, bleeding heart. She lay all day on her little bed vainly dwelling on the irrevocable past, looking back on all that she had lost with incurable longing and bitter regret. When this season of lamenting had worn itself out, Laurel grew hard and proud and tried to forget—a hard task that many, stronger than our little heroine, have essayed in vain.

After awhile she found out that she would have to draw again on the contents of her already diminished purse. There were garments to be provided for the little stranger that was coming to brighten her darkened life. She would not choose coarse, cheap garments now, such as she had bought for herself. She selected the finest, whitest linen, the softest, warmest flannel, the daintiest muslin, and was even a little extravagant in the matter of dainty laces and Hamburg trimmings. Then, when the complete and pretty outfit was laid away, with lavender and rose-leaves between the snowy folds, Laurel counted the few dollars that were left from her expenditures, and became frightened.

"When it is all gone, what shall I do?" she asked herself, blankly. "Where is the next to come from?"

And her startled reason harshly answered her: "You will have to work for it. You will have to earn it."

Laurel did not know how to earn money. She had never been taught any available thing, and her delicate condition of health precluded the idea of going out into the busy world to toil. Besides, her morbid sensibilities shrunk from the thought of encountering strangers who would look upon her with coldness, perhaps suspicion.

She was in despair at first, but she suddenly remembered how easily and quickly her reckless, pleasure-loving father had earned the wherewithal for their support. [Pg 100]

"The publishers were always eager for papa's MSS.," she said to herself hopefully; "and, being his daughter, I must have inherited his genius. I will write."

She was not egotistical. She was simply ignorant of the world's ways. She did not know how many failed in the world of letters, where one succeeded. The idea took hold of her fancy, and without a dream of failure, she armed herself with a ream of foolscap, plenty of ink and pens, and went enthusiastically to work.

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

Ill news flies apace. It was not long before Beatrix Wentworth, leisurely reading her New York paper in London, came upon the story of that tragedy on the beautiful Hudson—read the ending of the strange story of love and temptation, for which she felt herself in some degree responsible, since she herself had sent Laurel Vane to Eden.

She threw down the paper and wept bitterly. It was true that she had been angry with Laurel because she had deceived St. Leon Le Roy. She had known that she would find it harder to be forgiven for her elopement with Cyril since Laurel's willful marriage, but in this moment she forgot her pique, her annoyance, her resentment at Laurel's fault, and her heart was full of grief and pity over the girl's sad fate. She remembered how young and fair and loving the erring girl had been, and she said to herself that St. Leon Le Roy had been too hard and cold when he found her out. He might have forgiven her, he should have been kind and pitiful to her, at least, for the sake of that mad love that had tempted her to sin.

Cyril agreed with her that the proud, rich man might have forgiven the lovely, hapless girl for the sake of her great love. He had felt so grateful to Laurel Vane for the service she had done him and Beatrix, that he wished her the greatest good and the greatest happiness that is possible to mortals. It came upon him with a great shock, that the beautiful, dark-eyed girl, with the crimson lips, like a pomegranate flower, and the shining, golden hair was dead—worse than all, dead because she could not bear her life, driven into the dark, cold river by the intensity of her despair. He wondered what Mr. Le Roy's feelings could be.

"I should feel like a murderer," he said, to Beatrix. "It would seem to me that with my own hand I had pushed the poor child into the cruel river."

"He was so proud! All my life I have heard of the Le Roy pride," said Beatrix. "I have felt frightened for Laurel, ever since I found out what she had done. I never doubted that he would put her away from him when he found her out; but I never dreamed she would be driven to suicide. I thought that after awhile he would forgive her and take her back."

She could not bear to think of the gentle, beautiful, golden-haired girl, lying dead. She wept when she recalled her first meeting with her, and the temptation that had entered her mind. How sadly their girlish conspiracy had ended for the dead author's daughter. [Pg 101]

"I was her evil genius, but I only meant to be kind to her," she repeated, remorsefully, many times.

Even Clarice, who had been very angry with Laurel, and who had judged her hardly at first, had nothing but tears and regrets for the dead girl. Her passionate love that had ended in so sad a tragedy set her apart in solemn sacredness. She had atoned for her fault with her life.

"We must write to Mr. Le Roy," said Cyril Wentworth. "We must confess all our fault in sending Laurel to Eden. We must tell him how kind and true and sweet she was until her mad love led her astray. We must beg him to forgive her now that she is dead."

Beatrice wrote. It was a brave though most pathetic letter. She owned her fault in sending Laurel to Eden, she dwelt pathetically on her temptation to do so. She begged his pardon for her fault, and then she pleaded for Laurel dead as warmly and earnestly as if she had been living to profit by the prayers of her friend. The page was blistered by her tears, but no answer ever came to her earnest appeal. It seemed that Mr. Le Roy was indeed hard and unforgiving. He could not accord his pardon to any of the actors in the strange drama that had shadowed his life.

Then Beatrice wrote to her parents, humbly acknowledging her fault and praying their pardon. She loved them dearly although she had deserted them for her handsome, adoring young lover. She had a faint hope that they would forgive her and Cyril and bid them come home. She longed for her father's kiss of welcome, her mother's clasping arms.

Oh, how impatiently she waited for the answer to that letter! How eagerly she longed to be pardoned for the girlish conspiracy that had ended so disastrously to Laurel Vane! She began to see her fault in a darker light now since the tragedy at Eden. The shadow of Laurel's grave seemed to fall long and dark across her wedded happiness!

An answer came at last from her outraged father—such an answer as withered all the springing-hopes in her breast. They would never forgive her for her fault. They had no longer a daughter. Their Beatrice was the same as dead to them, and they wished never to hear from Cyril Wentworth's wife.

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## CHAPTER XLVII.

"I want that rose so much,  
I would take the world back there to the night  
When I saw it blush in the grass, to touch  
It once in that fair fall light;  
And only once if I might.

"Never any rose before  
Was like that rose very well I know  
Never another rose any more  
Will blow as that rose did blow."

St. Leon Le Roy sat alone in his handsome, spacious library. He had been reading, but the book of poems had fallen from his hand, and he was dreamily repeating some lines that had touched an aching chord in his heart:

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"I want that rose so much,  
I would take the world back there to the night  
When I saw it blush in the grass, to touch  
It once in that fair fall light;  
And only once if I might."

Memory was busy at his heart, for time had not healed, it had only seared the wound of years ago.

Eight years had come and gone since that terrible night when his bitter anger and hard judgment had driven his erring childish wife out into the darkness of death. Scarcely an hour ago he had stood by the broken marble shaft that marked her grave and seen the gray moss creeping over the sweet, simple name—

"LAUREL,  
Beloved wife of St. Leon Le Roy."

*Beloved!* Yes, he had carved it on her tombstone when all too late to save the broken heart that had loved him with a madness that proved its own destruction. *Beloved!* ah, he never knew how well until the slow years coming and going, "barren of all joy," had shown him how empty and hollow was all the world measured with what he had lost. All his life was a long regret, an echo of the poet's plaint:

"Oh, to call back the days that are not!"

The years had marked his face with the story of their sadness. Handsome as Apollo still, there were lines of pain about the cold, proud lids, there were silver threads clustering in the raven locks tossed carelessly back from the white brow, there were shadows always lying *perdu* in the

splendid dark eyes. For years he had been a lonely wanderer by land and sea, but now that he had come home again to Eden and to his mother, and to Laurel's grave, he found that he had not forgotten—that he never could forget.

He had been standing by her grave where she had rested for eight long years, he had read her name carved on the cold, white marble, but back here in the room where he had wooed her for his wife, where she had promised to be his, it seemed to him that he could not make her dead. She haunted him—not in

"The garments  
Dripping like cerement,"

in which she had been drawn from her watery grave; but bright, blushing, beautiful, as in those days forever past when she had come to Eden first and made herself his fate.

His fate! Yes, it had come to that. The one woman who had stirred his heart to its deepest depths, who had loved him so blindly, and deceived him so terribly, had made herself his fate. He had not forgotten her, he never would forget. He remembered the dark, wistful eyes, the trembling smile of the crimson lips, the curling golden hair, the warm, dimpled, white hands. Ah! only to clasp them again, only to kiss the lovely responsive lips, what would he not have given!

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"But that rose is not  
Anywhere just now—God knows  
Where all the old sweetness goes."

"If only I had forgiven her," he said to himself as he had said it over and over in the long, weary years. "She was only a child and the temptation was so great. I was hard and cold. I thought only of myself, my own injuries. Poor little loving Laurel, driven to her death by my hard judgment. Ah, that my sorrow, my love, my repentance could bring her back!"

He bent his head wearily down upon his folded hands heedless of the light, gliding step that came to his side, the soft touch that fell upon his hair, the voice that breathed in loving sympathy, "My son."

It was his mother. She knew where he had been, and her heart was full of grief and sorrow for his hopeless pain. Yet she knew that words were powerless to soothe the agony of remorse and pain that filled his heart. She only came with her silent sympathy to be near him because she loved him and shared in his grief.

He looked up at last, trying to seem cheerful for her sake, for she, too, was sadly changed by the progress of the years. The soft waves of hair that clustered on her brow had grown snowy white, the high-bred patrician face was pale and sad, her voice had always a tone of unconscious pathos in its low, clear modulations.

"I am sorry you have found me thus, mother," he said, seeing the sorrowful tears shining in her gentle eyes. "Years should have taught me to be brave and strong. But you know where I have been. It brought the past all back, and temporarily unnerved me."

"Yes, I know. But you will feel better by and by," she said simply, feeling that silence was better than words before such grief as his. It was a subject on which they never conversed. She had felt it was a cruel and unkind act when she first learned of the interview that St. Leon had refused to allow between her and Laurel that tragic night. She had reproached him most bitterly for it once, but ever since she had held her peace. There was that in his face, when she looked at him, that told of a conscience never at rest, of a heart whose self-reproaches were harder to bear than words of hers could have been. She grew to be sorry for him, and never, by word or sign, added to his pain; for the proud, lonely, disappointed old woman idolized her stately son even yet, although by his hard, unforgiving course toward Laurel Vane he had shattered the dearest hope of her life.

That hope, that longing for an heir to Eden—for another Le Roy to rule and reign at the grand old home on the Hudson, when she and St. Leon should have passed away—was long since dead. She had ceased even to hope that her son would ever marry again. She saw how coldly and carelessly he turned from the fair faces that smiled upon him, how restless and impatient he was under the requirements of society. When he died, their fine estates, their vast wealth, would have to pass to distant relations, mere strangers bearing another name. It was hard, it hurt her pride cruelly, but she said nothing to St. Leon. She kept her tears and her bitter lamentations for that quiet grave, where the unfulfilled hope of her life lay buried in darkness forever. For the sake of that hope she had been willing to forgive Laurel's deceit and duplicity. She would have forgiven even more for the sake of holding her grandchild in her arms.

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It was too late now. St. Leon would never marry, would never forget. With a smothered sigh, she tried to put the vexing thought out of her mind, and with the same laudable intent toward St. Leon, she roused herself and said, quietly:

"I do not believe I have told you yet, St. Leon, that we have new neighbors at Belle Vue?"

Belle Vue was the country house next to them, and one almost as beautiful as Eden. It was scarcely a mile away, and St. Leon looked up with some little interest, as he inquired:

"What? Have the Armisteads sold out or gone away?"

"Both. Robert Armistead failed in his banking business, and it involved the loss of his whole private fortune. He sold out everything, and went West with his family to seek his fortune again."

"I am sorry for Armistead," said St. Leon Le Roy, in that vague, conventional tone, in which one is usually sorry for the misfortunes that do not touch himself. "And so there are new people at Belle Vue?"

"Yes, they have been down about a month."

"Are they new rich people?" St. Leon asked, with some little disdain.

"Indeed, I do not know. I should say not, however," said his mother. "People have taken them up very sociably. There is an old gentleman, a Mr. Ford, quite a traveled man, I am told. His niece lives with him, and her son. She is a widow, and literary."

"What has she written?" he inquires, with faint interest.

"Several novels—'Ermengarde,' 'The Curse of Gold,' 'Sacrificed,' and some others. Mr. Gordon is her New York publisher, but I think she has been in Europe lately with Mr. Ford."

Some little excitement gleams in his eyes.

"The author of 'Sacrificed' our nearest neighbor!" he exclaims. "Why, mother, did you know that her books have made quite a stir abroad as well as at home? They are quite the fashion."

"I am sure I liked them myself—the style is very fresh and pure. Do you think we ought to call at Belle Vue, St. Leon? I have been thinking that it is my duty to do so."

"Perhaps it is. I will go with you, if you wish, some day. I am just a little curious over the blue-stocking, but I dare say she is old, and wears caps and spectacles," he answers, carelessly enough.

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

"Laurie! Laurie! come and carry my flowers for me!" called a voice.

It was sweet and clear as a chime of silver bells, but it pierced St. Leon Le Roy's heart like a sword-point. It thrilled and quivered through him, stirring him with a blended joy and pain. He listened, and again the sweet voice cried:

"Come, my son! Mamma is waiting for you."

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They were calling at Belle Vue—St. Leon and his mother. Mr. Ford had entertained them graciously in the splendid blue and gold drawing-room, but Mrs. Lynn could not be found. "She must be out walking," said her uncle, disappointedly, and after awhile he invited them to come out into the rose-garden. She might be there, he said. It was a favorite haunt of hers.

So, in the freshness and beauty of the July morning, they went out into the graveled paths lying whitely in the sunshine, forming such an exquisite contrast to the green grass and the beds of glorious ever-blooming roses, with the morning dew still shining on their bright petals; and while they walked that voice came to St. Leon like an echo from the buried past—dead and buried for eight long years.

"She is here. I will bring her to you," Mr. Ford says, nervously, starting away from them; and they pause by a little crystal fountain throwing up diamond spray into the clear, bright air, and wait—St. Leon with his heart beating strangely, thrilled to blended ecstasy and despair by a voice.

"Her voice is like—" Mrs. Le Roy begins; then shuts her lips over the unspoken name, vexed with herself that she was about to sadden the tenor of her idol's thoughts. "Let us walk on a little further," she amends, abruptly, and a few more steps bring them upon a picture.

Mr. Ford has found his niece. He is standing talking to her earnestly, making no move to return to his guests. Perhaps he is explaining to her the fact of their presence.

"Am I going mad?" St. Leon asks himself, with stern, set lips and wildly staring eyes.

"She is not of us, as I divine;  
She comes from another, stiller world of the dead."

The tide of years rolls backward. He has forgotten Mrs. Lynn the authoress as if she had never been. This slender, stately woman with her white hand resting lightly on Mr. Ford's arm is a ghost from the past; the dark, uplifted eyes, the tender crimson mouth, the waving, golden hair, are like hers whom, for a little while he believed to be an angel, but finding her only a faulty mortal, he had sternly put away from him. So like, so like, that he cannot take his eyes from the white-robed form with the wide sun-hat tilted carelessly back from the low white brow with its clustering waves of sunny hair, and the white hands full of roses, most of them dewy crimson, as if she loved that color best.

While he gazes like one stupefied, they turn and walk toward him. St. Leon is conscious of a little admonitory pinch administered by his mother's slim fingers, and tries to rouse himself to the occasion. In a minute he is conscious of a lamentable failure as he meets Mrs. Lynn's dark eyes upturned to his in calm surprise. She is by far the cooler and calmer of the two, and directly he finds himself walking by her side along the graveled path, the elder couple pacing sedately after them.

He is aware that he has not distinguished himself in this meeting with the gifted authoress. His

"You like flowers, Mrs. Lynn?" is the hackneyed observation.

"I love them," she answers, quickly, and he is instantly reminded of another who "loved," not "liked," the fragrant, dewy darlings.

"You see, I have gathered almost more than I can carry," she goes on, looking lovingly at the great bunch in her hands. "I called my son Laurie to help me, but he is chasing a butterfly, I dare say, and out of sound of my voice."

"Permit me," he says, taking them courteously from her, and at the unavoidable touch of their hands a hot crimson flush mounts to his brow, his heart beats painfully.

"I must go away from here, presently," he says to himself, impatiently. "I have no self-possession at all. What a ninny Mrs. Lynn must believe me. And yet—and yet, she is so like a ghost from my dead past that I lose my senses looking on her perfect face!"

"We have some very rare flowers at Eden," he says, "I hope you will come and see them since you are so fond of them. You shall carry away all you like."

"Thank you. I shall be sure to come," she answers. "I know—I have heard, I mean—that the flowers at Eden are wonderful."

"I hope they will justify your expectations," he says. "Shall we sit down here and rest, Mrs. Lynn? You must be tired."

They sit down on a rustic bench side by side, and the elderly couple follow suit at some little distance. It is a lovely morning and a lovely scene.

The golden sunshine sifts down through leafy boughs all about them, the air is sweet with the song of birds and the breath of flowers, the blue waves of the Hudson are visible at some little distance, lending additional beauty to the charming scene. Mrs. Lynn looks away at the river and St. Leon looks at her, trying to convince himself that her likeness to the dead is not so great as he had fancied.

"Laurel was a girl—this is a woman," he tells himself.

He is right. Mrs. Lynn is very young, but the sweet gravity, the exquisite majesty of womanhood are stamped on her pure, white brow. Thought, intellect, experience, are blended with her still youthful beauty, in charming combination. Laurel had been a beautiful rosebud, Mrs. Lynn was a perfect rose. And yet—he said to himself—Laurel at twenty-five would have been Mrs. Lynn's counterpart.

While she looked dreamily off at the river with those dark, heavily fringed eyes and he looked at her, a silence fell between them. It was broken by the laughter of a child. A beautiful boy came running down the path toward them and stopped at his mother's knee.

"Oh, mamma, I am so tired," he panted, breathlessly, his rosy lips parted with happy laughter, "and I did not catch my beautiful butterfly after all!"

The lovely young mother turned toward her child. Her cheek was very pale, there was a strange light in her dark eyes.

"Laurie, do you not see the gentleman?" she said. "Go and speak to him. Mr. Le Roy, this is my son, Laurence."

He did not blame her for the sweet ring of triumph in her voice. The boy was as handsome and spirited as a little prince. He had great, flashing dark eyes and clustering dark hair combined with perfect features at once proud and gentle. His beautiful rosy lips seemed made for smiles and kisses. His dark blue velvet suit set off his fine spirited little figure to the greatest perfection. [Pg 107]

Mr. Le Roy drew the manly little fellow to his side.

"I am very glad to make the acquaintance of so important a person as Mrs. Lynn's son," he said. "How old are you, Master Laurence?"

"Almost eight," said the little lad, and his mother amended in a low voice, that had somehow a strange quiver in its sweetness, "Seven and a half, Mr. Le Roy." Then in a sadder cadence, "The only son of his mother, and she is a widow."

"I have no papa, Mr. Le Roy," said the manly little fellow, in a tone of regret. "Other boys have fine times with their papas, they tell me, but I do not even remember mine. He died before I was born."

"Do not weary the gentleman with a recital of your family history, my dear," interposed his mother, gently. "Go now and speak to the lady who is sitting with Uncle Carlyle."

The child went away, followed by Mr. Le Roy's glance. He could not understand the strange yearning that drew him to the princely little lad.

"I have fancied you must be very proud of the books you have written, Mrs. Lynn," he said, impulsively. "I can fancy that you are prouder still of your son."

"I am," she answered, in a voice full of love and pride. "I cannot tell you how I love my boy, Mr. Le Roy. It seems to me that he is the most beautiful, the most intelligent, the most loving lad in the world. Do you blame me?" suddenly lifting her dark, grave eyes to his face. "Should not you be proud of such a son, Mr. Le Roy?"

"No, I do not blame you," he answered. "I am quite sure I should be proud of such a fine little son," and a thrill of sorrow and self-reproach went through him as he recalled the words his mother had spoken to him eight long years ago. "In a little while there would have been an heir to Eden."

A buried hope! Ah! if only he had been a little less hard and cold! If only Laurel had told him her precious secret! He must have forgiven her then. He could not have withheld his pardon.

There was something in Mrs. Lynn's tone he could not understand. Was it a taunt at his childlessness? Or was it only a mother's triumph in her treasure? He looked at the beautiful face. It was faintly flushed, the drooping lashes were dewy with unfallen tears. Some deep emotion stirred her heart and made roses on her breast rise and fall with its intensity. While he puzzled over it, there came a startled cry from Mr. Ford. Mrs. Le Roy had fallen from her seat in a dead faint.

St. Leon hastened to her. They raised her up, but it was some little time before she recovered. None could understand what had caused her swoon.

"She was sitting with Laurie on her knee talking very brightly and pleasantly, and quite suddenly—all at once, as it were—her arms dropped from around the child and she fell like one dead," said Mr. Ford. "I cannot understand it. Has your mother any heart disease, Mr. Le Roy?"

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"None, but she is not very strong," St. Leon answered. "She very seldom goes out."

Then she opened her eyes and looked at him.

"Take me home, St. Leon," she said, "I am very tired."

Mrs. Lynn pressed her cordially to remain at Belle Vue until she was better.

"No, I cannot stay now," Mrs. Le Roy answered gravely. "But you will pardon my display of weakness, Mrs. Lynn, and you will come to see me soon—will you not?"

Mrs. Lynn promised with a smile that she would certainly accept the invitation.

"And the child—you will be sure to bring him?" said Mrs. Le Roy, kissing the wondering little face.

"If you wish it," assented the beautiful young authoress, and her face grew paler still when Mrs. Le Roy impulsively kissed her cheek. St. Leon wondered why her small hand was so cold as he pressed it lightly at parting. He would have wondered yet more could he have seen the white, agonized face she turned upon Mr. Ford when they had gone away.

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

Carlyle Ford went up to the beautiful woman and took her cold trembling hands gently in his. She was as pale as death, and she shivered as if an icy wave had broken over her.

"My dear, this has been too much for you," he said. "I see now that we should never have come here."

Mrs. Lynn did not answer. She only drew her white hands from his, and, sinking down, covered her face with them. She remained thus some minutes, and her uncle saw that the bright tears were raining through her fingers, and her graceful figure heaving with deep emotion.

The child had returned to his sport with the butterflies and flowers as soon as the visitors departed. They were alone, and in a little while Mrs. Lynn looked up and brushed the tears from her beautiful face.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "It may be that I was wrong to meet him at all. But, I had the greatest longing to see him after all these years. And, after all, I was no coward, Uncle Carlyle. I did not break down before *him*. I was calm and proud. He did not dream that I was other than I seemed."

"No; you played your part well," he said. "I was delighted with your dignity and grace. Mr. Le Roy was the more agitated of the two. He was struck by the resemblance. He showed deep, though repressed emotion."

"I think you give him credit for too much feeling," cried Mrs. Lynn, with a scornful flash in her dark eyes. "He has forgotten long ago."

"Perhaps so," said Mr. Ford, "yet I am inclined to think otherwise. And the lady—she could not keep her eyes off you and the child. She could not help seeing the likeness between her son and your son, I am sure. It was startling. The boy is much more like Mr. Le Roy than he is like you. The same hair and eyes, the same proud features, only he has your beautiful, tender mouth. Why did the lady faint?"

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"I cannot tell," Mrs. Lynn answered, drearily.

"I think she was unnerved by the resemblance. It brought back the past too vividly. My darling, they have not forgotten, as you think. I foresee a reconciliation," he said.

"Never!" cried Mrs. Lynn, with curling lips and flashing eyes. "I may be weak enough to care for him still, but I can never forget, and I will never return to him. I am a child no longer. I am a

woman, and my pride is equal to his own!"

The handsome, kindly face of old Mr. Ford looked grave and puzzled.

"My dear, is it right to cherish such pride?" he asked, slowly. "Were it not better to condone the past—to forgive and forget? Are you right to keep the heir of Eden from his own?"

"Uncle Carlyle, are you anxious to get rid of me?" asked the lovely, gifted woman, wistfully.

"No, no, dear! What should I do without you and the boy?" he cried. "But I do not want to be selfish; I do not want to keep St. Leon Le Roy's happiness from him."

The warm color flashed into her cheeks; she laughed bitterly.

"His happiness!" she cried. "His happiness! In his pride and cruelty he threw it away. He is as proud and cold now as he was then. He would take me back no sooner now than he would then. But why do we talk of these things? He will never have the chance. He will never know the truth. They have raised a costly monument to St. Leon Le Roy's *beloved wife*—for them that is the end."

"Eight years," he said, musingly. "At least he has been faithful to her memory. It is strange that he has not married again—if not for love, at least for the sake of an heir."

She caught her breath sharply; her lovely face grew deathly white.

"Married! married!" she cried, sharply. "Why do you talk of such things, Uncle Carlyle?"

"I did not mean to pain you, Laurel," he answered. "But, my dear, it seems so strange. Le Roy has a princely estate and fine old name. It would be only natural if he should wish to leave it to his own descendants."

"So he shall," she said. "When I am dead, he shall have Laurie. I have everything arranged in the clearest fashion. There will be no difficulty in proving his identity. But, Uncle Carlyle, do not let us talk of these things. They hurt me."

"You want to be alone," he said. "Very well, dear; I will go and play with my boy. Forgive me for saying those things that hurt you; I did not mean to do so."

He went away, and Laurel sunk down wearily, her hands clinched tightly together, a look of woe and dread on her lovely face.

"Married again!" she uttered, hoarsely. "Well, and if he should, what is there to prevent him? Could I speak? would I speak? No! And yet—ah, Heaven! the fatal glamour is on me still. It is a mad love—nothing less!"

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The wind sighed in the trees, the murmur of the river came to her softly, the sweet, calm day seemed to woo her to forgetfulness, but the beautiful woman who had won fame and wealth and honor in those long years since she had been put away from her husband's heart, sat silent, with a look of mute despair on her fair young face. That mad love, that terrible temptation of her girlhood, had spoiled her life.

"It is a mad love," she repeated to herself. "How my face burned, and my heart beat, when I met him. All the old madness surged up within me, the love, the sorrow, the shame at my deceit. It is a wonder I did not fall down dead at his feet! No one ever loved more deeply than I loved St. Leon Le Roy," she went on, after a pause. "If he had forgiven me my fault that night when he had found me out, I should have been the happiest woman in the world, instead of being the most wretched, as I am! Ah! why did I ever come back here? It was a blind mistake. It has reopened the old wound, and it is bleeding, bleeding. Ah, Heaven, shall I never learn indifference? Shall I never sear my careless wound? I must go away soon. I was weak and wild ever to have come here with Uncle Carlyle."

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## CHAPTER I.

St. Leon Le Roy and his mother had a very quiet drive homeward. Both were busy with their own thoughts. The lady leaned back against the cushions of the phaeton with closed eyes, and a look of grave thought on her pale, wan features. St. Leon, with his calm, dark eyes, and sternly set lips, was as much absorbed as she was in grave and earnest thought. He sat very quietly holding the reins, and neither spoke until they had reached home. Then, when they were sitting together, St. Leon, with an open book before him, her keen eyes noted that he had not turned a page for half an hour, and she spoke abruptly:

"St. Leon, what do you think of the famous authoress?"

His head drooped still lower over his book, as he answered, quietly:

"She is very beautiful and brilliant. I had not expected to find her so young and fair."

"She is the loveliest woman I ever saw," said Mrs. Le Roy.

"Yes," he answered, simply, in his gravely quiet tone.

He did not care to talk. He was like one in a strange, trance-like dream. His soul had been shaken and stirred to its depths by the beautiful woman who had flashed before him with his dead wife's face and voice and the crimson roses in her hands, such as Laurel had loved to gather. The tide of time rolled backward, and in place of the proud, calm woman, the gifted genius before whom he

had bowed to-day, came a vision of a simple, dark-eyed girl, wandering through the grounds at Eden, flitting among the fragrant flowers, herself the fairest rose of all. Did she love him, that beautiful impostor, St. Leon Le Roy asked himself, as he had done many times before in the eight years, while that marble cross had towered above the dead heart, whose secret now would never be told? Did she love him, indeed? Had she sinned through her love, not for wealth and position as he had believed that terrible night? And there came back to him through the mist of years the memory of that beautiful, tearful face, and the pleading voice.

"Ah, if only I had forgiven her!" he said to himself, in an agony of remorse and regret. "She loved me. I was mad to doubt it. Save for her one fault, her one deception, Laurel Vane was pure and true and innocent. I was hard and cold. Few men but would have forgiven her such a transgression for love's sake."

His face fell forward on the open pages of the book where he had been reading drearily enough some mournful lines that seemed to fit his mood:

"Glitters the dew and shines the river,  
Up comes the lily and dries her bell,  
But two are walking apart forever,  
And wave their hands for a mute farewell."

A light touch fell on the bowed head whose raven locks were threaded with silver that grief, not time, had blanched. He glanced up, startled, into his mother's wistful face.

"Well?" he said, with a slight contraction of his straight, dark brows.

There was a strange, repressed emotion in her face as she answered:

"It is not *well*, St. Leon. You are unnerved, troubled, thoughtful even beyond your wont. Will you forgive me for asking why?"

The dark, inscrutable eyes looked at her gravely.

"I might turn your deeds upon yourself," he said. "Why did you faint in the garden at Belle Vue to-day?"

She flushed, and then grew very pale again.

"I will tell you the truth," she said, "or a part of it at least. I was unnerved and startled by the terrible resemblance of the beautiful Mrs. Lynn to—"

"My lost wife," he said, slowly, filling up her painful pause.

"So you noticed it?" she said.

"Could one help it?" he asked in his slow, repressed voice. "Why do you call it a terrible resemblance, mother?"

"She is so like, so like—she is the living image of what Laurel must have been now if she lived! And the child, St. Leon, the child—" she broke down suddenly, and burst into wild, hysterical sobbing.

Shocked by the passionate grief so unusual in his stately lady-mother, he drew his arm tenderly around her and led her to a seat, kneeling down humbly before her.

"Mother, does the old wound still ache so bitterly?" he said, in blended pity and remorse. "I had thought the pain of it was past. Ah, I can never forgive myself for the madness, the cruelty, that robbed you of the daughter you loved!"

"And the grandchild I expected," she sobbed bitterly. "Ah, St. Leon, I can never forget how my hopes were blasted! Forgive me for those weak tears, my son. All the old regret and sorrow were stirred anew in my heart to-day by the sight of Mrs. Lynn and her beautiful child."

He had no answer for her. He was too proud and reserved to tell his mother the truth—that he, too, had been shaken by a ghost from the past that day. He knelt by her silently, letting her sob out all her grief and sorrow against his shoulder, and when she had grown calmer he said, gently:

"Mother, dear, you must not see this Mrs. Lynn again. It agitates you too much. After all, it is only a resemblance. She might not feel flattered if she knew that we compared her with my simple, little girl-wife, dead so long ago. Let me take you away to the seashore or the mountains while Mrs. Lynn remains at Belle Vue."

But she negatived the proposition in extreme alarm.

"It could only afford me pleasure to see Mrs. Lynn again," she declared. "I love her for her likeness to the dead. I am unwilling to lose a single chance of seeing her. And I promise you, St. Leon, that I will not lose my self-control again as I did to-day in the first shock of meeting her. I will be as calm and cold as she is."

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## CHAPTER LI.

A few days later Mr. Ford brought his niece and her son to call at Eden.

The brilliant writer looked very elegant and distinguished in her dress of soft, rich black silk and



lace. A dainty bonnet of black lace and gleaming jet rested on the dark golden waves of her hair, and set off to the greatest advantage her blonde loveliness, lighted by such dark and star-like eyes. A soft color glowed on her rounded cheeks, and her eyes were bright with repressed excitement, but no trace of her heart's emotion showed in her calm, gracious manner as she bowed to her handsome host and greeted his stately mother. She had schooled herself to calmness, and no heartless queen of society ever bore herself with more *nonchalant* ease and outward coldness than did Laurel in the hour when she re-entered the home she had left long years before, a wretched, despairing child, for whom life seemed over and done. Now, as she stepped across the threshold, a beautiful, proud, successful woman, whom the world delighted to honor, she remembered that broken-hearted child with a pang of bitterness that steeled her heart to the softness that had melted it for a moment. She *would* be cold and calm for the sake of the girl so cruelly put away from her husband's heart, so cruelly misjudged and scorned. Yet, as it all rushed over her again, she wondered, as she had wondered over and over in the past, how she had lived through her sorrow—that sorrow which she had said so many times would kill her when it came.

"The day drags through, though storms keep out the sun,  
And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on."

She said the pathetic lines over to herself, wearily, even as she touched St. Leon's hand with her own and looked at him with a smile—a smile bright but cold like moonlight on snow. He had no answering smile in return. His face was almost stern in its marble pallor and intensity of repressed emotion. His firm white hand was cold as ice as it touched the rosy palm so graciously extended; his voice had a strange tone, even to himself, as he welcomed her to his home.

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"You have the most beautiful home on the Hudson. Eden is far more beautiful than Belle Vue," she said to him, with her bright, cold smile.

"I am glad you like my home. It will always have an added charm in my eyes since Mrs. Lynn has deigned to praise it," St. Leon answered, gallantly.

She thanked him almost mockingly, and then their conversation turned upon the safe ground of generalities—upon art, and books, and foreign travel, where both were at home. He found Mrs. Lynn his equal in every sense. Her mind was rarely cultured and stored with knowledge, her thoughts were beautiful and crystal clear. She held her own with the ease and grace of one who knew the world, yet retained the native innocence and frankness of a child. St. Leon's hauteur and reserve melted before the charm of her manner, and he became his natural self again, meeting her on her own ground with polished words and brilliant thoughts. Their glances met each other's calmly, telling no tales of that "auld lang syne" when "eyes looked love to eyes that spake again."

"Two maskers! what had they to do  
With vows forsworn and loves untrue?"

Mrs. Le Roy gave her attention to Mr. Ford and the child. She had drawn little Laurence to a seat by her side, and was showing him some fine engravings. She could not keep her fascinated eyes from the beautiful, spirited, boyish face that bore such a startling resemblance to that of her own son. Mr. Ford watched her closely, and he saw that her heart had gone out to the child, and that she was trying to win his love in return. He looked on approvingly, longing, in the depths of his unselfish heart, for a reconciliation between the long-parted husband and wife.

"Neither one is happy," he said to himself, looking at them as they sat talking calmly like strangers—the proud husband and the proud wife. "That man has a story written on his face; he has suffered intensely; is it possible he does not suspect the truth? Can he look at her—speak to her—and not recognize her? It almost seems impossible. There was never beauty before like hers—never such winsomeness and artless grace. Before I came here I despised St. Leon Le Roy. Why is it that I pity him now? Is it because I can read his sorrow and repentance in the sadness of his face?"

Mr. Le Roy, rising at that moment, said, quietly, looking at his mother:

"I am taking Mrs. Lynn to the library, mother, to show her a book we have been discussing, if you and Mr. Ford will excuse us."

"Certainly," both answered in a breath; and they went away, followed by Mrs. Le Roy's startled glance.

"Your niece is very beautiful," she said, turning back, after a moment, to Mr. Ford. "Has she been long a widow?"

"Seven years," he answered.

"Then the child has never known his father?" she said, with a light, pitying touch of her ringed white hand on the boy's dark, clustering curls.

"No—much to the lad's regret," said Mr. Ford.

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"I dare say you have acted a father's part by the fatherless one," she remarked, turning her grave, questioning eyes on his face. It seemed as if she was fascinated to speak of little Laurence. She could not keep her eyes nor her thoughts from him.

"Since I have known him—yes," Mr. Ford answered. "But though his mother is my own sister's child, Mrs. Le Roy, I never met her, never knew of her existence, until she was a widow, with a

son three years old."

She looked the curiosity she was too well bred to express in words.

"Do you care to know the reason why?" asked Mr. Ford.

"I confess you have aroused my curiosity," she replied, with a smile.

"Then I will tell you," he said. "When I was quite a lad I ran away to Australia, seized with a gold-fever, then very prevalent in New York. After years of ill luck, sickness, and misfortune, I struck a bonanza. I was an old man then, and my heart yearned for the home and the friends of my youth. I came home, determined to share my wealth and prosperity with them, but all were dead, mother, father, and even the toddling little sister I had loved so dearly. She had married, and died in a short time after, leaving one daughter, whom I found it impossible to trace. Several years later, I discovered my missing niece, by a fortunate accident, in the brilliant novelist, Mrs. Lynn."

"She is very young to have achieved fame in the literary world," said the lady.

"The result of necessity, my dear madam," Mr. Ford replied. "Losing her husband before the birth of her child, my niece, scarcely more than a child herself then, was thrown upon her own resources for support. She became a writer, and most fortunately for the sake of the little, helpless being dependent upon her care, she succeeded where the many fail," he ended, leaving Mrs. Le Roy's unspoken curiosity on the subject of Mrs. Lynn even greater than before, through his meager explanation.

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## CHAPTER LII.

Mr. Le Roy led his beautiful guest to the library, and placed a chair beside the table where he usually sat to read. Laurel sat silently a moment with averted face. She was fighting down her heart, thrusting back the memories that would arise like pallid ghosts from the dead past. Here in this room, nay, in this very chair where she was sitting, St. Leon had wooed her for his wife. She could be cold and proud in the grand drawing-room. It was there that he had put her away from him, there that he had spoken the cruel, angry words that sundered their hearts and lives forever. The memory of that night and that scene hardened her heart to her unforgiving husband, and helped her to be cold and careless. Here it was all different. This quiet retreat was hallowed by some of the sweetest moments of her life.

That hour which had lifted her from dumb, jealous misery and despair to the heights of bliss had come to her here.

The memory of her year of wedded happiness rushed over her with all the love and joy that had been crowded into it. [Pg 115]

She trembled, she recalled all the horror and despair that had followed after, and for a moment it seemed to her that all was a hideous dream from which she would awaken presently. She longed to cry out aloud, to rush from this haunted room, to do anything that would free her from the gaze of those sad, dark eyes, whose burning glances as they sought her face seemed to read her secret and to plead with her for love and reconciliation. A smothered gasp, and she shook off the dangerous, luring spell, and became herself again, calm, indifferent, yet gracious, the woman that slighted and scorned love had made "icily splendid," fatally fair, as many a man had owned to his cost.

She looked about for something to divert her attention, and saw just at her hand lying on the table a volume elegantly bound in crimson and gold. She took it in her hand and read aloud the gold-lettered title on the back: "Laurel Blossoms."

"Laurel Blossoms," she repeated, and turned to the title-page. With widening eyes and a swift color that went and came from white to red and from red to white she read: "By Louis Vane."

St. Leon had drawn a chair near her. He spoke to her now in a calm, carefully modulated voice that went far toward restoring her shattered equanimity.

"That is a collection of tales and essays, Mrs. Lynn, arranged by myself for publication. The author is long since dead. He was my wife's father."

"Yes," she murmured, turning the precious pages slowly with her trembling hands, her eyes downcast, and bravely keeping back their threatening tears.

"Perhaps some one has told you the romantic story of my marriage, Mrs. Lynn?" he said, watching the fair, drooping face with earnest eyes.

She shook her head. She would not trust herself to speak.

"No?" he said. "Then perhaps I will tell you some day myself. You love romance and tragedy, I infer, from your books. My marriage had the elements of both in it."

She bowed again silently. It was quite impossible for her to utter a word just then; but she said to herself, with a sort of passionate disdain, that he was very daring, indeed, to speak to her of his marriage—to her, of all women in the world.

He went on in his quiet, musical tones:

"Louis Vane was a genius, but, like many another gifted spirit, he smirched the glorious talents given him in the degradation of strong drink. He loved pleasure better than fame. But for his weakness and his madness he would have made a name that must have gone ringing down the ages."

She was silent, steeling her heart to the sweetness of those words of praise. She remembered that strong, sweet voice that praised Louis Vane for his genius now, denouncing and scorning her that night, long years ago, as a "drunken journalist's daughter."

"When my wife died, seven years ago," went on St. Leon, "I made it my duty and my pleasure to gather her father's miscellaneous writings from the journals and magazines where they were scattered, and publish them in one volume, that they might be rescued from oblivion and preserved for the pleasure of his admirers. The book had a great sale. It was very popular. Have you never seen it before, Mrs. Lynn?"

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Again she shook her head in silence.

"Then let me beg your acceptance of this copy. I should like you to read it. I assure you it will repay perusal. You may wonder at its fanciful name. My dead young wife was called Laurel. Is it not a sweet name? In memory of her I called it 'Laurel Blossoms'!"

Would he never have done speaking? A strange softness was stealing over her heart that frightened her. No other atonement on earth could have touched and moved her like this one. It was what she could have wished most upon earth—to have her father's brilliant essays collected into this beautiful volume, and yet she had never thought of doing it herself. A pang of self-reproach pierced her heart.

"Forgive me, father," she whispered, inly, as if the dead were present in spirit, and could know and feel her mute repentance. "I have been so absorbed in my own selfish sorrows and triumphs I forgot to rescue your genius from the oblivion that must have engulfed it but for this man's effort."

All this while he was waiting for an answer. What must he think of her strange silence? With a great effort she lifted her eyes to his face, and said, in tones ringing with latent sarcasm and incredulity:

"You must have loved your wife very dearly, Mr. Le Roy?"

"More than I knew," he answered, simply, and the tone even more than the words betrayed the burden of remorse and sorrow his heart had borne for years.

She rose abruptly with the precious volume of her father's writings clasped tightly in her hands. She was afraid to stay longer—afraid of that sweet and subtle pity that thrilled her woman's heart.

"I have made too long a call for a first visit," she said. "Another time will do for the books of which we spoke. The 'Laurel Blossoms' made me forget."

"You have forgotten the flowers I promised to show you, too," he said. "Let me take you to the garden now."

"Some other time. I must really go now," she said, feeling that for this one day she had already borne all that she could bear.

He did not urge the point. Perhaps the trial was as hard for him as for her.

"Will you drive with me to-morrow?" he asked, as he touched her hand at parting. "There are some beautiful views in this vicinity that I should like to have the pleasure of showing you."

"Yes, I will go," she answered, hastily, unable to deny herself the blended bliss and pain of his companionship even while she despised herself for what she disdainfully termed to herself her woman's weakness.

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## CHAPTER LIII.

To-morrow came—one of the fairest of summer days, with a sea-blue sky and the goldenest sunshine and most fragrant flowers. Laurel prepared for her drive with Mr. Le Roy with a beating heart. She felt that she was acting imprudently in going with him, for she scarcely dared trust herself in his presence; but she could not draw back from her promise. An irresistible fascination drew her on to the meeting with the husband so hopelessly and madly loved in the long years while she wandered afar from him, an alien from his home and heart.

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Some strange thoughts were stirring in her heart, evoked by his looks and words. She could scarcely fail to see that he had repented.

"Perhaps, if he knew that Laurel Vane was living, he would forgive her and take her back. Her fault might not seem so black and bitter now, seen through the kindly veil of years," she said to herself. "He might even love and trust me again."

But there came to her a sudden remembrance of words he had spoken long ago, when he had told her of Maud Merivale's deceit and falsity.

"I could never again love a woman who had deceived me. Once fallen from its pedestal, the

broken idol could never be restored again."

She looked at the beautiful, passion-pale face reflected in the glittering mirror, and a hopeless sigh drifted across her lips.

"I am a 'broken idol,'" she said, drearily. "I have fallen from my place in his heart, and I can never be taken back, St. Leon is too proud to forgive my girlhood's sin."

She had not been unloved in all these years. Proud men and gifted had bowed before her, won by her beauty and her genius. They marveled at her coldness, her indifference. No one guessed at the mad love lying deep in her heart under the ashes of the dead years—a smoldering fire that in the past few days had leaped into a living flame. It needed all her strength, all her pride, to fight it back. She went with him, and when he saw her he could scarcely repress a startled cry. She had chosen the colors that always became his young wife best—white and scarlet. Her white hat and a wreath of scarlet poppies; some scarlet passion-flowers were fastened in the neck of her white dress. She was so like—so like his dead wife that it would only have seemed natural to have taken her in his arms and kissed her and called her by the name of the dead.

Suddenly, as they paused before the white gates of a great, wide inclosure, she uttered a cry of dismay.

"This is the cemetery, Mr. Le Roy! Surely, you did not mean to bring me here!"

"Yes," he answered, and helped her down from the landau and led her into the grim necropolis of the dead.

She did not understand. She walked by him, silent and frightened, among the gleaming marbles, the dark-green shrubbery, the beautiful flowers with which loving hearts had decorated the graves of their dead. She heard her husband dreamily repeating some sad familiar words:

"The massy marbles rest  
On the lips that we have prest  
In their bloom:  
And the names we loved to hear  
Have been carved for many a year  
On the tomb."

Suddenly he drew her hand in his arm, and led her down a shaded green alley-way. In a minute they paused before a little plot of ground whose velvet-green turf was bright with beds of rarest flowers. In the midst was a single grave, with roses and passion-flowers trailing over it. Laurel lifted her eyes and read the name cut deep into the gleaming marble shaft.

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"LAUREL,  
Beloved wife of St. Leon Le Roy."

She felt a strangely hysterical inclination to laugh out aloud. How strange it seemed to stand there, so full of life and youth and passion, and read her own name carved upon a gravestone! How strange, how horrible to feel that, standing there by her husband's side, she was as dead to him as if, indeed, her lifeless clay were moldering in that low, green grave!

His low, deep voice broke the trance of hysterical horror that held her senses enchained:

"Mrs. Lynn, I told you yesterday that there were elements of romance and tragedy in my marriage that might interest even you. I promised, too, that I would tell you the story some day. Here, at poor Laurel's grave, I propose to keep my word."

He found her a seat, and she waited silently to hear him speak. She was most curious to hear the story of her girlhood's love and temptation told by her husband's lips from his own standpoint.

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## CHAPTER LIV.

St. Leon Le Roy threw himself down on the green turf at Mrs. Lynn's feet, and resting his arm on his wife's grave, leaned his head in his hand. So resting he could look up and note every expression of the beautiful face above him—the face, deathly pale with emotion now, for all she tried so bravely to appear politely calm and interested like the stranger she pretended to be.

"Do you care to hear this story I am about to tell you?" he asked, abruptly.

"I am sure I shall be interested," she replied, gently, and thus encouraged he began.

"It is more than nine years ago now that my mother received a letter from a lady friend in New York—Mrs. Gordon, the wife of the well-known publisher—perhaps you know him, Mrs. Lynn," he said.

"Mr. Gordon is my publisher," she replied.

"He had an only child—a beautiful daughter," said Mr. Le Roy. "She had betrothed herself to a poor young man of whom her parents disapproved. They proposed to break off the match by strategy, if possible. They sent their daughter to Eden to remain a few months, proposing to send her lover abroad during her absence, and so separate them as to end the affair in the quietest manner possible."

He paused, but she made no comment on his words, only inclined her golden head attentively.

"I was five-and-thirty years old when Beatrix Gordon came to Eden, she a beautiful child of sixteen," went on St. Leon, slowly, as if looking back into the past. "Perhaps you will think I was too old for her, Mrs. Lynn, but my heart was carried by storm, as it were, by the lovely girl. I think almost from the first hour of our meeting I recognized my fate in her. She was like no other woman I ever met. If I talked to you all day, Mrs. Lynn," said St. Leon, looking deep into her eyes with his dark, mesmeric orbs, "I could never portray in words her beauty and sweetness. There was a charm of novelty about them. She was rarely original. She was afraid of me at first. *That* piqued me, although it was my own fault. Very soon I found that my pique was the offspring of unconscious love. I, St. Leon Le Roy, who despised women, who had been angry at first at the girl's coming, had lost my heart to the slip of a girl who belonged to another. The bitter consciousness of that latter fact aroused my jealousy and added fuel to the fire of my passion. I was angry with myself, ashamed of myself, yet I could no more have checked the course of my strong, passionate love than I could have stemmed the tide of a rushing river. Can you understand me, Mrs. Lynn?"

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She answered quietly, "Yes," but to her own heart she said: "Ah, if he only knew."

"Then you may guess something of what I suffered," said St. Leon, and for a moment he was silent, and his gaze turned from her face, as he seemed lost in retrospection. She looked at the dark, haughtily handsome face, and her heart thrilled within her. It had all its old, luring, magnetic charm for her. She had repented her fault long ago; she was sorry for her sin, bitterly sorry, but looking on her husband's face now, she did not wonder that she had sinned for his sake. In spite of time, in spite of pride, the old love was strong within her. She might have exclaimed, with Byron:

"I deemed that time, I deemed that pride,  
Had quenched at length my early flame;  
Nor knew till seated by thy side,  
My heart in all save hope the same."

It was well for her that when he resumed his story he did not look up. Too much of her heart was written on her lovely, mobile face.

"From the despair of my jealous love and misery, I wakened to passionate bliss," he continued. "I know not when the child's first shyness and dread of me changed to a tenderer feeling, but it came upon me suddenly, and with heavenly sweetness, that she loved me. She had forgotten her lover in New York. Mrs. Lynn, I swear I believed she loved me even as I loved her, with a singleness and depth of devotion such as few hearts are capable of feeling. God forgive me that I doubted her once! No one was ever more cruelly punished for unbelief and hardness than I have been!"

With his eyes downcast upon that low, green grave, he did not see how bitterly her lip curled as it always did when that night of her betrayal rushed bleakly over her.

"She gave me her tender, trusting heart, and her beautiful self," he went on. "We were married. Her parents were absent, and it was a very quiet ceremony in a quiet church that gave me the desire of my heart. We went abroad for our honeymoon, and remained more than a year."

A sigh, heavy with his heart's despair, drifted over his lips.

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"*Such* a year, Mrs. Lynn!—a golden year, into whose short space was crowded all the real happiness and bliss of my life. She made me the happiest, most blessed of men in that brief time. I am forty-four years old, Mrs. Lynn, but, it seems to me I have only really lived one year—one year that shines on me from the past like a radiant star in the darkness of night."

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## CHAPTER LV.

Laurel felt a dreary kind of pleasure in hearing her husband ascribe to her the only real happiness of his life. It was some atonement for all that she had borne, all that she had suffered. Her heart beat quick and fast beneath her white robe. He went on sadly:

"Never was there a stormier ending to a beautiful, sunny, summer day, never a sadder waking from a happy dream. And it was all so swift and sudden. It was like Burns' poem.

"No pause the dire extremes between,  
She made me blest and broke my heart."

Ah, yes, Laurel could remember how swift and sudden it had all been—how like a thunderbolt falling from a clear sky. She sat there pale and silent, and listened to her own story told by her husband's lips, and felt a strange, dreary, aching pity for the girl who had loved and suffered so much quite as if it had been another woman than herself.

"We came home at last," he said. "My mother was very ill, and my wife nursed and tended her unweariedly, and with all a daughter's devotion, until she became convalescent. Then the hour of my awakening came. It was so swift, so horribly sudden, I wonder sometimes that it did not kill me."

Ah, she had wondered so often that she, too, had not died beneath the stroke of that cruel fate. But she made no sign, she only sat still and looked at the bowed head before her, and listened to his words.

"The Gordons came down from New York one day quite unexpectedly, to visit their daughter. I was delighted, Mrs. Lynn, because I thought it would add to my darling's happiness. I thought I would surprise her, so I concealed the fact of their arrival, and led her into their presence full of happiness myself in the prospect of witnessing her amazement and joy."

Mrs. Lynn held her costly fan before her face a moment. She did not want him to see the spasms of agony that convulsed her face. Ah, how bitterly it all rushed over her, the pain, the shame, the horror of that supreme moment he was now portraying.

"You are smothering a yawn behind your fan," he said. "Does my story weary you, Mrs. Lynn? It has not developed into a plot for a novel yet, has it? You see I have been telling it in the plainest fashion. I have not embellished it like a story-writer. And, besides, up to the moment of which I have spoken it had not developed any phases of the tragic. It had only been the simplest, sweetest love idyl that was ever lived."

"That is perfectly true," she said to herself, with a burning face and a strangely throbbing heart. [Pg 121]

"But in the moment when I led my beautiful wife into the drawing-room at Eden to meet her parents the *dénouement* came," said St. Leon Le Roy. "The tragic element entered my story then. Can you guess what happened, Mrs. Lynn?"

"Your wife was properly surprised, and glad to see her parents, I presume," said Mrs. Lynn, with an air of polite interest.

His dark lashes lifted, he gazed at her sadly a moment, then they fell again.

"No one could guess what *did* take place," said Mr. Le Roy. "It was like a romance. You have never written anything stranger in all your novels, Mrs. Lynn. But you must not expect me to describe it to you in the language of fiction. Your own imagination must invest it with all the eloquence it merits. I have been surprised at many things in my life, Mrs. Lynn, but I was never more surprised, never more shocked, than I was in the moment when I led my Beatrix up to her mother. I had expected demonstrations of delighted affection, I beheld only utter dismay and confusion. Can you believe it, Mrs. Lynn? My young wife and the Gordons had never met before in their lives!"

A faint murmur came from her lips, meant to convey surprise. He accepted it as such, and went on slowly:

"Then it all came out. I had been deceived. I had been made the victim of a clever conspiracy. Two beautiful, clever girls had plotted together and the result was this: Beatrix Gordon had never come to Eden. She had gone away and married her lover, and she had sent Laurel Vane to us in her place. It was cleverly planned, as I have said just now, but I have often wondered how Laurel carried it out, and escaped detection. She was innocent and transparent as a child. She was frightened always, I know, for when all came out I could recall many things that pointed to the truth if only I had not been so blind. But fate helped it on, and made me the husband, not of Beatrix Gordon, the daughter of the wealthy, well-born publisher, but of Laurel Vane, the penniless orphan child of an author who, with the genius of an Edgar Allan Poe, had shared all the weaknesses of the great poet and died as miserable."

He paused, Laurel wondered if he could hear her heart beating in the stillness of that place of graves. It sounded so loudly in her ears, it almost drowned his voice.

It was only by the greatest effort of her pride and will that she preserved her outward calmness.

"It was a terrible discovery for me to make," he said. "I was wounded in my love, in my faith, in my pride. Can you imagine what I did, Mrs. Lynn?"

He had lifted his drooping head, and was looking straight into her face. She looked back at him steadily, almost scornfully, as she replied:

"You loved her so dearly, and she made you so happy, perhaps I should not err if I said that you forgave the girl for her sin."

He crushed back something like a groan upon his lips.

"Do you think I should have done so, Mrs. Lynn?" he asked.

"I do not know how to answer you," she said, and her voice trembled. "From a woman's standpoint, I should answer yes. But men are unlike women, are they not?—harder, colder, prone to harsh judgments!" [Pg 122]

"Yes, men are harder," he said, and was silent until she broke the strange stillness with her strange voice.

"Do you love Tennyson, Mr. Le Roy? I do. I think one of the grandest, most beautiful passages in the book is King Arthur's forgiveness of Guinevere's terrible sin. Do you remember those words:

"'Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God forgives'?"

"Her sin was not like Guinevere's," he said, hastily.

"And therefore the more easily to be forgiven," she said. "Do you not think that your wife suffered for her sin? And, after all, it was for love's sake. And women do and dare so much for love's sake,

remember."

"You are speaking as if I did not forgive her," he said. "I had not told you that yet."

"But I fancied it must be so," she said, "because this is her grave."

The shot went home. He shivered, and a hollow groan escaped his lips.

"Would she have died for such a cause?" he asked, and she answered gravely, and with a touch of sadness.

"Women's hearts have broken for even lighter causes."

To herself she said, mournfully: "I should have died myself if it had not been for little Laurie's coming. I could not have lived through these weary years if it had not been for the little child that loved me!"

"*Her* heart was broken then," he said, "for I refused to forgive her, Mrs. Lynn. I was hard and stern and angry. But I never dreamed what would happen."

"What did she do?" inquired the brilliant novelist, with interest.

"She went away that night, Mrs. Lynn, and all search for her proved futile and vain. In a few days after a body washed up from the river—a young, golden-haired woman. They said it was Laurel, my missing wife. You know the rest. This is her grave."

Laurel looked at the grassy mound with a strange dreary wonder over the waif whom they had buried there. She wondered what her name and history had been. "Perhaps as sad as mine," she sighed to herself.

"This is her grave," he repeated. "Ah, Mrs. Lynn, you have a glowing, vivid imagination. Can you fancy what I have suffered? Can you comprehend how the demons of remorse and despair have pursued me unceasingly?"

"Then you repented when too late?" she said.

"Too late," he echoed, drearily. "Yes, I repented when *too late*. Ah, Mrs. Lynn, are there any sadder words than those two in the English language?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied. "You remember what the poet Whittier has written?"

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,  
The saddest are these: "It might have been.""

"It might have been," he repeated. "Ah, yes, I can testify to all the sadness of those words! Have I not felt it all? Since she died my life has been one dreary penance, one long regret. Ah, Mrs. Lynn, if only I had forgiven her—if only I had not driven her from me by my harshness and cruelty! I was a fool, and blind. She loved me and made me happy. She sinned through her love, first, for Beatrix Gordon, then for me. Her story is the saddest, the most pitiful I ever heard or read. I should have forgiven the child—she was nothing but a child, and she had not been well taught. But it was all so sudden, and I was half dazed by the shock. Ah, well, I have had ample time to repent my haste and madness. The years have been long and dreary enough without my darling. Every time I come here to this quiet grave I whisper to the silent dust beneath:

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"Oh, to call back the days that are not!  
My eyes were blinded, your words were few,  
Do you know the truth now up in heaven,  
Laurel, Laurel, tender and true?"

How the sweet passion and sorrow of the words moved her! He was sorry for his cruelty, he repented it all. She said to herself that if she had really been dead in that grave beneath him, she must have heard those words—they would have thrilled even her dust. Tennyson's beautiful words came into her mind:

"My dust would hear him and beat  
Had it lain for a century dead,  
Would start and tremble under his feet  
And blossom in purple and red."

He looked up at her sitting there so fair and young, and so like the dead, and his heart went out to her in passionate adoration. He cried out, hoarsely, in his deep emotion:

"Mrs. Lynn, what do you think? Have I really sinned beyond forgiveness? If Laurel could come back from the world of shadows, do you think she would forgive me for that night?"

"Are you asking me to tell you what I should do in your wife's place, Mr. Le Roy?" she asked him in a low, strange voice.

"Yes, put yourself in her place," he replied. "Tell me, could you forgive me and love me again after the coldness with which I put my wife from me that night?"

"I do not believe I could ever forget or forgive such unkindness," she replied.

He looked at her keenly, with a brooding trouble in his eyes.

"Perhaps you do not look at the subject quite as my young wife would have done," he said, anxiously. "Laurel loved me, Mrs. Lynn. Do not forget that. Would she not forgive me for love's

sweet sake?"

"No, I do not think she would. Her pride would be stronger than her love," answered the beautiful woman.

"Laurel was not proud," said St. Leon Le Roy.

"Not when you loved her, not when she was happy," said Mrs. Lynn. "But can you not fancy the sweetness of even such a nature as hers turned to gall by wrong and ruth? I repeat it, Mr. Le Roy, if I were in your Laurel's place, if I could come back after all those years, I believe I should be as proud and cold as I was gentle once, I do not believe I could forgive you!"

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He sprung up, he held out his arms to her yearningly, his face transfigured by the yearning passion of his heart.

"Laurel, Laurel, do not speak to me so cruelly, do not judge me so hardly!" he cried. "Do you think I do not know you, my darling?—that I have not known you since the moment we met again? That senseless marble lies when it says my wife is dead! You are she, you are Laurel Le Roy!"

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## CHAPTER LVI.

There was a moment of the most utter silence while St. Leon Le Roy's wild, appealing words died upon the stillness of the solemn place.

Mrs. Lynn was struck dumb for an instant by the suddenness and passion of her husband's accusation. She grew ghastly pale—she trembled like a wind-blown leaf, the denial she would have uttered died gaspingly upon her quivering lips.

"You are my wife," he repeated. "There was never but one face, one voice in this world like yours, and they belonged to Laurel Vane. My darling, you will not deny the truth! You did not throw yourself into the dark, cruel river that summer night. You went away and hid yourself from me in the wide world. It was some unknown waif whom we buried in this shaft for you, my own sweet one! That marble cross speaks falsely. Thank God you live, Laurel, to hear the story of my sorrow and repentance! You cannot, you will not, refuse to forgive me!"

She sprung from her seat as he advanced, and slowly retreated before him, her eyes wide and dark with terror; she put out her white hands before her as if to ward off a blow.

"You are mad!" she cried, hoarsely. "You are simply mad, Mr. Le Roy! Your great sorrow has unhinged your brain. Come away from this gloomy place of graves into the world again, and I will try to forget your momentary madness!"

"Do you mean to deny the truth?" he cried, gazing reproachfully at the beautiful, defiant face. "Is it right to scorn me, Laurel, when I have so bitterly repented the wrong I did you? Is it right to defraud me of my child's love—right to defraud the child of his father's love? Do you think I do not know that your beautiful little Laurence is my own child? Shall I tell you why my mother fainted in your rose garden that day? She lifted the boy's dark, clustering locks from his temples and saw the familiar Le Roy birth-mark—the crimson heart that you, my wife, have so often kissed on my temple. I saw her, although I made no sign. Laurel, you will give me my son? You will come home to Eden yourself, forgetting and forgiving all the past, will you not, my injured wife? I will atone for my momentary hardness by the devotion of a lifetime!"

He held out his arms yearningly to the beautiful, startled woman standing dumbly before him with a smile of scorn on her perfect lips. She was terribly frightened when she found that he had recognized her, but she had no thought of confessing the truth. All the hard, bitter pride that had grown up in her heart these eight years was at war with her husband's claim. She held her hands out before her as if to ward him off as he came nearer to her side.

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"I can only say, as I did just now, that you are mad," she said. "I can excuse you because I know that your brain must be turned by your sorrow. But this must go no further. I will not endure it. There are limits that even my patience will not suffer to be passed. I am nothing to you, St. Leon Le Roy—nothing! As for the child, you have deceived yourself. It is the scar of a wound on the child's temple, not a birth-mark as you think."

He stared at her like one dazed, his arms dropping weakly at his sides. That she would refuse to forgive him he had expected and dreaded, but that she would deny her identity when taxed with it, had not occurred to him. It put quite a new phase upon the matter. She had not staggered his convictions in the least, but she had shown him what ground both stood upon. He was powerless, helpless. There was nothing for him but to bow to her will.

"You deny my charges?" he said. "You cut the ground from under my feet and leave me without a hope—with nothing but this grave?"

"Yes," she answered, pale as death, beautiful, proud, defiant. "I forgive you for your brief madness. We will never recur to it again. Now, will you take me home?"

"In a moment," he answered. He was busy plucking some flowers from the grave. He held them out to her.

"Mrs. Lynn, will you take these flowers?" he said. "Take them and keep them. They may remind



you sometimes of all that is buried in this grave for me—love, hope, happiness."

She took them silently, and they went away from that place of tombs into the busy, beautiful world again. They spoke but little driving home, and then only on indifferent subjects—never on the theme lying deep in their hearts—the love, the remorse, the unsatisfied longing, the fruitless pain of their lives.

But Laurel, when she had reached her own private room, threw herself down upon the floor with a great, tearless sob of utter agony.

"Oh, how cruel I am," she cried. "For the sake of my miserable pride, I have murdered my own last chance of happiness!"

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## CHAPTER LVII.

It was a long while before Laurel recovered her calmness. She had been severely shaken by her interview with Mr. Le Roy. She did not feel half so triumphant and victorious as she might have done. She had repulsed her husband, she had made him suffer all that she had suffered that night when he had renounced her. But there was none of the sweetness of victory in her triumph. She was at war with herself. Her own heart was a traitor. It only ached over the conquest of love by ruthless pride. The triumph was bitterer than defeat.

When she dragged herself up from the floor at last, with all her misery written on her face, she saw a letter lying on her toilet-table. It had been brought in by her maid during her absence. She took it up, and found that it was addressed to herself, in the delicate, refined hand of Mrs. Le Roy.

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An expression of dismay and dread came over the beautiful face.

"Why has she written to me?" she asked herself. "Does she, too, mean to claim me and Laurie?"

She grew very pale at the thought. A dread came over her that they would take her child from her to punish her for her willfulness and pride.

"They shall not have him," she said to herself, setting her little white teeth firmly together. "I will take my little son and fly to the uttermost ends of the earth with him. I was foolish and weak even to have come here. I forgot many things I ought to have remembered. I forgot utterly that tell-tale birth mark on my child's temple—the birth-mark of all the Le Roys. I never dreamed that they would suspect me. I thought that grave with my name upon it was an all sufficient shield for me."

She opened the letter and read it. It was a beautiful, pathetic appeal that brought tears to Laurel's proud, dark eyes. Mrs. Le Roy had recognized her, too. She prayed her to forgive St. Leon for his hardness of heart, and to return to him.

"I do not know whether my son has recognized you or not, Laurel," wrote the anxious mother. "You may remember that he is very proud and reserved. He is silent. He makes no sign. And yet I think that he could not have failed to know you. Forgive him, Laurel. He has suffered bitterly and repented sorely. Let me tell him that you are living, and that your beautiful little son is his own child. Let me tell him that you both will come home to us. Ah, Laurel, my dear daughter, I cannot tell you how tenderly my heart goes out to you, both for your own sake and for that of the child. How I love the beautiful, manly little lad! He is the heir to Eden, the last descendant of the Le Roys, my son's son, my only grandchild. All these years you have kept him from us; you have had all his sweetness to yourself. I have no word of blame for you, my dear daughter. I know you were greatly wronged—almost driven, as it were, into the course you adopted. But you will give him to us now, will you not, dear? You will come back to the home you never should have left, you will be the light of our hearts and our eyes, as you were before that fatal night. To-morrow I shall come to you for your answer. I have not told St. Leon of my discovery. I shall not speak to him until after I see you. But I cannot help but hope, that your answer will be a favorable one. You would not have come here among us if you had not meant to be kind to us. I remember your gentle, loving heart, my dear, and, although you have the world at your feet now, I think you will be the same tender, loving little girl that you were of old. You will come home to us soon—you and my darling little Laurence."

"Laurence, Laurence, it is only of the child they think—only of their heir to Eden," she said to herself, bitterly. "I see through it all. They would endure the mother for the child's sake! I understand! But it shall not be. I will take my boy away. I have cared for him all these years, and I will do so still. They who were so cruel to the mother shall have none of the child's love!"

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And when Mrs. Le Roy called the next day she was astounded to find that Carlyle Ford and Mrs. Lynn and her son had left Belle Vue the previous evening. None of the servants were aware of their destination. One of them gave the lady a note that Mrs. Lynn had left behind for her. It was brief and cruelly cold.

"I regret that I cannot have the honor of receiving you, as we are leaving suddenly and for an indefinite time," wrote Mrs. Lynn. "I must say that your letter was all Greek to

me. You seem laboring under some strange hallucination of the brain. I fear you are threatened with a brain fever. I would advise you to consult a physician. Delays are dangerous in such cases."

Mrs. Le Roy went home like one dazed. She had not counted on such a terrible disappointment. She had staked everything on Laurel's sweet, forgiving disposition. She had made no allowance for a woman's pride.

She went to the library, where St. Leon sat among his books—dreaming, not reading—dreaming of a fair, cold, scornful face that shone on him from the walls of memory—

"Passionless, pale, cold face, star-sweet on a gloom profound;  
Woman-like, taking revenge too deep for a transient wrong."

He glanced up absently at his mother's entrance, too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice her irrepressible agitation.

"Oh, St. Leon," she cried out, distressfully. "Mrs. Lynn has gone away!"

She saw the handsome face whiten under its healthy brown. He did not speak for a moment, only put out his hand and drew her gently to him. Then he said, in a hoarse, strained voice:

"Well, mother?"

The tone told her more than words. She broke out, vehemently:

"My son, did you know, did you understand? It was Laurel, your wife, it was your own child. Can you realize it, my son?"

He answered, wearily:

"Yes, I know, dear."

"You knew, and you let her go without a word—oh, St. Leon," she exclaimed, reproachfully.

The dark mustached lips parted in a slight sad smile.

"You wrong me, mother," he said: "I spoke to her. I claimed her and the child. She denied her identity, she laughed me to scorn. There was nothing more for me to say or do."

"You give her up like this—her and the heir to Eden?" she exclaimed, in dismay.

"There is nothing else to do—she denies my claim, and that ends all. I make no war upon women," he answered, sadly, but firmly.

Tears of bitter disappointment crowded to her eyes. She had so counted upon this reconciliation, so longed to have Laurel back—Laurel and the little child who was heir to Eden.

"And the child—will you give him up without a word?" she asked, in bitter disappointment. "You have every legal right to him." [Pg 128]

"Granted—but do you think I could take him from Laurel? No, no, mother, she shall keep the little one. We will not disturb her. It may be some little atonement for that night, if we leave her in peace;" then, with a weary sigh, "Let us drop the subject, mother."

Sorely disappointed, she acquiesced in his decision, knowing that there was no appeal from his firm will.

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## CHAPTER LVIII.

Laurel had left Belle Vue in a sudden panic of fear and dread. She was afraid that her bold denial of her identity would irritate the Le Roys into an attempt to prove their charges and claim her child. She determined to put a wide distance between herself and her husband, regretting in her new-born terror that she had ever exposed herself to the danger of being recognized by him.

She did not confide to her uncle the fact that she had been charged with her identity by her husband and his mother. She knew that Mr. Ford sympathized with the Le Roys in their repentance and sorrow, and she knew what his advice would be. She had not confided to him the reason of her sudden flitting. She knew that he was the loving slave of her imperious will, and that she need but express a wish to have it gratified. So the grand home on the Hudson was deserted, and they sought "fresh fields and pastures new," according to Laurel's capricious fancy. If Mr. Ford wondered at her fickleness, he kept it to himself. Perhaps he was not altogether sorry that Laurel was not to leave him yet. His heartstrings were very closely entwined around her and her beautiful child. He would have been lonely indeed without them.

They went to a noted summer resort by the seashore, and Laurel declared that she meant to labor diligently here on a new book she had commenced to write that summer. But the new novel did not grow very fast. The brilliant author was restless and ill at ease. Some days she would devote to her task with a feverish energy and persistence, often writing far into the night. Again there would be days and days when the manuscript remained locked in her desk neglected and untouched, while Laurel threw herself into the whirl of social pleasure with a zest born of the desire to forget. But neither in work nor pleasure did she find that lethean draught for which her lips thirsted. She was haunted by a voice, a face. She could not choose but remember.

Even if it had been possible for her to forget, little Laurence would not have allowed her to do so. Strange to say, the child had taken a wondrous fancy to the Le Roys, both mother and son. He prattled of them often in his pretty childish fashion, regretting that he could not see them again, and every word was like a dagger in the mother's heart. She knew that it was nature and instinct clamoring for its own in the boy's heart. Sometimes she was almost melted, sometimes she felt keenly the wrong she had done the child in depriving him of his father's love. But her hard, bitter pride was always stronger than her pity and her love.

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Little Laurence found a congenial playmate at last, and his regrets for Belle Vue and Eden grew daily less and less. It was a little golden-haired girl of six years old, called Trixy by her nurse, who brought her to play on the sands daily with her little toy spade and bucket. In Laurie's shell-gathering expeditions with his own nurse, the two children became acquainted and were soon inseparable companions and friends. Laurence did not rest until he had made his mother acquainted with the little beauty.

"I cannot understand my feelings when I look at little Trixy," Mrs. Lynn said to her uncle, with a pretty, puzzled air. "The child's face haunts me. In some inexplicable manner she recalls the past. And yet I cannot remember whom she is like."

She was not fated to remain long in ignorance of the resemblance that haunted her so strangely.

She was standing on the shore one day looking dreamily out at the swelling, foam-capped waves, as they rolled in and broke in crystal spray at her feet, when she was startled by little Trixy's voice, crying vivaciously:

"Oh, Laurie, here comes mamma! Now she can see *your* mamma, Laurie!"

Mrs. Lynn turned toward the children, and saw a fair, blue eyed woman coming up to them. She gazed in silence a moment, then gave a great strangling gasp of surprise and recognition. It was Beatrix Wentworth!

The past rushed bleakly over Laurel's memory; the past, with all its love and sorrow and shame. The sight of this fair woman brought it all back freshly and with terrible realism. She stood like one turned to stone, as Mrs. Wentworth came up to her, a look of startled wonder on her lovely blonde face.

"Laurel Vane!" she cried, and put out both her hands.

Laurel drew back coldly, all her self-possession returning.

"You have made a mistake," she said; "I am Mrs. Lynn!"

Mrs. Wentworth colored deeply.

"I beg your pardon—you are right," she said. "I was so startled by your likeness to my friend that I forgot for the moment that she by whose name I called you is long since numbered with the dead!"

"I regret to have awakened unpleasant emotions in your mind," said Laurel, gently, as she offered her card to Mrs. Wentworth.

"You are little Trixy's mother," she went on, smiling. "I am very glad to know you for her sake. She and my little son are great friends."

"You have a son?" said Mrs. Wentworth, as she exchanged cards with Laurel. She sighed heavily, and then Laurel noticed that she wore a black dress. "Ah, I had a son, too, Mrs. Lynn, a beautiful boy that would be as old now as yours had he lived, but he lies buried in an English graveyard."

"You are English?" asked Laurel, gently, her heart melting in sympathy with the tear that sparkled down Beatrix's cheek.

"No, I am American, but I have lived in England ever since my marriage, nine years ago. Little Trixy was born in London, as also my little Cyril, dead three years ago. We have come home now to live."

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"We?" said Mrs. Lynn, with a slight, interrogative accent on the pronoun.

"I should have said Mr. Wentworth and myself, and Trixy. There are only three of us," explained Beatrix, pensively, and smothering a sigh.

Laurel wondered to herself whether the Gordons had ever forgiven their daughter; she wondered what had become of smart, pretty Clarice Wells. But she could not ask any of these questions that filled her thoughts, because she had decided that she, in her own proper identity, would remain as dead to Mrs. Wentworth as she was to the rest of the world. They stood there side by side, the two fair women who had so greatly influenced each other's lives, and gazed pensively at the sun-gilded waves, trying to put away the thoughts of the past that each recalled to the other, and to recall themselves to the present.

"I have read your books, Mrs. Lynn," said Beatrix. "I think they are among the most beautiful in the language. I am proud of you as an American author."

"You praise my poor efforts too highly," Laurel said, with her slow, half-sad smile.

"I do not think so. The critics agree with me at least," said Beatrix. "Do you not find it very pleasant to be laurel crowned, Mrs. Lynn—to win the applause of the world and own a name that will live beyond the grave?"

"To be

"Conscious that a world's regret  
Would seek us where we lie!"

quoted Mrs. Lynn, with a slight, sad smile. "Ah, Mrs. Wentworth, will you believe that I have scarcely ever regarded the subject from that point of view? When I first took up literary work it was to win bread for my little child. Since success has crowned my efforts, since hard necessity drives me no longer, I labor on because I have need to fill an empty void in my life. From first to last I have had no thought of fame."

The soft sigh of the waves blending with her voice made it sound very sad. Mrs. Wentworth looked at the beautiful, proud face curiously. Some kind of a history was written on it. There was a lingering shadow in the somber, dark eyes, a sorrowful gravity about the lovely crimson lips. She wondered what that empty void might be. And then she remembered that she had heard that Mrs. Lynn was a widow.

"It is grief for her husband," said Beatrix to herself.

"I suppose we all have something in our lives that we are glad to forget in the oblivion of hard work, or even in the pursuit of pleasure," she said. "My little Cyril's death left an aching void in my own heart, and I have another sorrow too. I have been a disobedient child to my parents. I never fully appreciated the enormity of my unpardonable fault until I had a little daughter of my own."

Beatrix spoke in a tone of dreamy sadness. She did not seem to be speaking to a stranger, but rather to a friend. The subtle likeness between Mrs. Lynn and Laurel Vane affected her strangely.

Laurel caught at her words quickly.

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"Your unpardoned fault," she echoed. "Do you mean to say that your parents never forgave your disobedience, Mrs. Wentworth?"

"Never," Beatrix answered, with a sigh that showed how deep her pain lay.

Then they were silent for a time. The idle loiterers on the beach, the casual passers by turned twice to look at the two fair women, so beautiful, so unlike in their beauty—Beatrix so lily-fair with her large blue eyes and pale-gold tresses; Laurel with her rare, unusual type of beauty, her dark eyes, her blonde skin, her burnished hair; the one in her dress of deep, lusterless black silk, the other in something white and soft and clinging, marvelously becoming to her graceful style.

"Shall you be long at the seaside?" Laurel inquired, presently.

"A few weeks—that is all," Beatrix replied. "Mr. Wentworth is in New York—business, you know, Mrs. Lynn—Trixy and I cannot stay long away from him."

"You are fond of him?" said Laurel, turning her large, wistful eyes on the other's tender face.

The tenderness deepened in Mrs. Wentworth's sweet blue eyes, and around her gentle lips.

"You would think so if you knew the story of our marriage," she said. "Ours was a real love-match, Mrs. Lynn. It was most romantic. Some day, when I know you better I will tell it to you. It would furnish you a plot for a novel."

Laurel turned her head aside and set her lips in a tense, hard line. She remembered how the story had been told her a few weeks ago in that green city of the dead beside the grave where the unknown waif lay under the name of Laurel Le Roy.

"God forbid that I should have to hear the story told again," she murmured to herself.

She looked back at Mrs. Wentworth and said, calmly, and even smilingly:

"It is very pleasant to hear of a real love-match in real life. I suppose you are very happy, Mrs. Wentworth?"

"Yes, I am very happy with my noble husband," Beatrix said, thoughtfully. "But my happiness was purchased at a bitter cost to another. I know what it is to feel the sharp sting of remorse, Mrs. Lynn."

Little Trixy came up with a beautiful shell and claimed her mother's attention. They went away together presently, and left Laurel to her own reflections. They were very sweet and noble ones. She was thinking of the Gordons—longing to reconcile them to their daughter and her husband.

"I am glad that she is happy with her husband," mused Laurel. "Oh, how differently our girlish conspiracy resulted for her and for me. And yet—would I change places with her? No, hers be the pleasure, mine the pain."

She walked slowly back to the hotel, leaving Laurie at play with his nurse on the shell-strewn beach. In the hotel corridor she encountered some new arrivals, ladies and gentlemen, going to their rooms. Quite oblivious of their interested, admiring stare, she passed on, and took no note of the pretty, painted blonde face that whitened beneath all her rouge as she stared aghast, and murmured, huskily:

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"Is it Laurel Vane or her ghost? I never saw such a terrible likeness!"

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## CHAPTER LIX.

Was it chance or fate that brought Mr. Gordon down, a few weeks later, to consult with Mrs. Lynn about the publication of her new book?

She was down on the shore with her little Laurence and his playmate, Trixy Wentworth. The little girl's mother had promised to join her presently. She and Mrs. Lynn had become quite intimate friends by this time. They were fond of each other, as two young, pretty, noble women like Beatrix and Laurel are apt to be when thrown together. Beatrix had told all her romantic story to Mrs. Lynn, and Laurel had heard it silently, and made no sign. She said to herself that that unhappy girl, over whose fate Beatrix drowned her blue eyes in regretful tears, must remain as one dead to all the world. She would not confess her secret. She would remain Mrs. Lynn to the end of the chapter.

She sat still on her low camp-chair, with her large parasol held open over her head, and waited for Beatrix to come. She had a book open in her lap, but she was not reading. Her large, dark, thoughtful eyes wandered from the pretty children at play with their attentive nurses, to the billowy foam capped waves rolling in to her feet with a hollow, mystical murmur full of woe and mystery.

Mr. Gordon came out to her there, and he was puzzled, as he always was, when he saw Mrs. Lynn, by her subtle likeness to some one he had seen or known, and whom he could not now recall.

"Have I ever told you how strangely you affect me, Mrs. Lynn?" he said. "You are like some one I have known whom I cannot now recall. If I could bring myself to believe in theories I have heard advanced, I should say I had known you in some other previous world."

She knew where he had seen her. It was at Eden that fatal night that had struck her down from happiness to the keenest despair. Her face grew pale, her limbs trembled beneath her.

"Some day the truth will break upon him with the suddenness of the lightning's flash. He will recognize me as Laurel Vane, the girl he refused to forgive and pity that fatal night. He will know that the scorn of proud, rich people did not quite crush me, that I survived it all," she said to herself with the pride that had become a part of her nature.

But she did not mean that he should recognize her if she could help it. Certainly she would never own the truth even if he taxed her with it: so she answered with a careless smile:

"The world is full of chance resemblances that puzzle and amaze us, Mr. Gordon. You see that little girl playing with my son there? Well, when I first saw her I had the oddest fancy that she was like some one I had seen or known. The likeness was haunting and troublesome at first, but I have grown used to it now. It does not trouble me any longer. Do look at her, Mr. Gordon. Is she not a lovely child?"

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He looked, and a sudden cry of wonder came from his lips. The years rolled backward, and in the face of little Trixy he seemed to see his own Beatrix in her tender childhood—his beautiful, beloved daughter, who had been so willful and disobedient, and to whose sin he had refused his forgiveness.

"She is like some one I have known, too. Ah, so like, so like!" he said, in a strange voice. "Who is she, Miss Lynn?"

"Her name is Trixy Wentworth, Mr. Gordon. She is an American child, but she was born in England. Her parents lived there nearly nine years. They have come back to New York to live now. Mr. Cyril Wentworth is in business there. Trixy is here with her mother for her health."

He stifled something like a groan upon his lips. Laurel saw how pale he had suddenly grown, and followed up her advantage by calling the little one to her and setting her on Mr. Gordon's knee.

"Give the gentleman a kiss, Trixy," she said to the lovely little golden-haired creature. "He is very lonely; he has no little girl of his own."

Trixy's ready sympathies were instantly enlisted by that, to her mind, pathetic statement. She gave Mr. Gordon a fastidious look-you-over stare, and, seeing that he was pleasant to look upon, put her round, dimpled arms about his neck and gave him a bear-like hug and a resounding kiss.

"Is it true that you really have no little girl?" she asked him, bending back her pretty head to look into his face with eyes that pierced his heart with their likeness to Beatrix—Beatrix, his little girl whom he had put away from his heart, hated and unforgiven, because she had disobeyed him.

He could not speak for a moment, and Mrs. Lynn said, gently, looking away at the restless sea the while:

"This little girl has a grandpapa in New York, Mr. Gordon, who has never seen her. Her mother made a marriage that displeased him, and he has never forgiven her. He has missed a world of love by his hardness and sternness—do you not think so?"

The dark-eyed little Laurence came running up before he could frame a reply.

"Oh, but, Trixy, you shouldn't be sitting on that gentleman's lap, you know," he exclaimed, "for you have promised to be my little wife!"

This childish jealousy provoked such a laugh from the elders, that it quite drowned the sound of a light, quick step that came up behind them. In a moment more Beatrix Wentworth came around in front of the group.

The smile died on her lips, as she saw her little daughter sitting on the lap of the stern father she had not beheld for more than nine years. Poor Beatrix looked frightened and dismayed. The

pretty rose-tint faded from her face, her lips trembled, and the words she strove to utter died silently upon them.

Laurel rose with an encouraging smile and drew her friend forward.

"Mr. Gordon," she said, "this is my friend, Mrs. Wentworth. She is little Trixy's mother."

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Beatrix looked upon into the face of her father through blinding tears and put out her hand.

"Papa, forgive me," she murmured, sadly.

There was a moment's dead silence. Mr. Gordon had put the child from his knee and risen, but he did not answer his daughter. She went on, in gentle, pleading tones.

"Papa, I have written to you so often and begged you to forgive me, and every time my letters came back to me unopened. Papa, I cannot say I am sorry for my fault, because Cyril is good and kind, and he makes me very happy. But I have grieved sorely for you and mamma, I have longed to be reconciled to you. Oh, surely you will not refuse to forgive me now that we are face to face!"

"Forgive her, Mr. Gordon," cried Laurel, impulsively.

The two fair faces, the pleading voices, the wondering eyes of the little children, were too much for Mr. Gordon's calmness. His pride and sternness melted into love and remorse. Laurel gave one glance at his quivering face and turned gently away. She knew that the end was won—that love had conquered pride. He would forgive Beatrix.

But she did not know that in this moment when the ice melted around his hard, cold heart and he forgave his disobedient daughter, new light had broken upon his mind. The sight of Beatrix had supplied the missing link that connected Mrs. Lynn so subtly with his past. Like a flash of lightning it dawned upon him that this was Laurel Vane.

That night at Eden rushed over his mind, freshly as though it were but yesterday. He saw again the beautiful impostor who had personated his own daughter and married the master of Eden.

While he gave Beatrix the tender embrace of forgiveness, he seemed to see in fancy the kneeling, suppliant girl to whom he had refused his forgiveness, whom no one had pitied, whom all had forsaken and ignored. Even in his anger that night he had been struck by the wondrous beauty of the girl. This was the same lovely face, with its charm only intensified by time; this was the same sweet voice asking him to pardon Beatrix that had begged forgiveness vainly for herself. He was full of wonder over his sudden discovery.

"They said that Le Roy's wife drowned herself, but it cannot be true. There is some terrible mistake, some unexplained mystery. This is Louis Vane's daughter, and she has inherited all the genius of her erratic father," he said to himself.

He did not know what to do. He was frightened at his own discovery. He wondered if Beatrix knew the truth. He inclined to believe that she did, but when he found an opportunity and questioned her he was rather staggered to find that Mrs. Lynn had resolutely denied her identity with Laurel Vane.

"I do not believe her. She is St. Leon Le Roy's wife, and the child is his. It bears its paternity on its face. What is your opinion, Beatrix?" asked the great publisher, thoughtfully.

"I believe that you are right," she replied; "I have believed that she was Mr. Le Roy's wife ever since I first met her several weeks ago. Her assertions to the contrary had no weight with me, although I held my peace and respected her reserve. I have been silent, but I have not been convinced."

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"What is her object in this strange denial of herself?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"Pride and wounded feeling," Beatrix answered, with the unerring instinct of a woman.

When he remembered that night long years ago he did not blame her much. They had scorned and flouted her cruelly among them—they had no pity on the erring girl—they had driven her to desperation, forgetting how young and friendless she had been. He wondered much what had been the history of the intervening years, and how she had come by her name of Mrs. Lynn.

"Only her *nom de plume*, perhaps," he thought; and then he said, aloud: "Beatrix, do you not think I ought to write to St. Leon Le Roy to come down here?"

"I think it would be perfectly proper," she replied.

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## CHAPTER LX.

Mrs. Wentworth and Mr. Gordon were not the only persons at the seaside who suspected that Mrs. Lynn was other than she seemed.

The curiosity of the pretty, faded widow, Mrs. Merivale, had been aroused by the first sight of Mrs. Lynn. She spared no pains until she obtained an introduction to the noted writer, over whose charms of mind and person all the best people at the seaside were enthusiastic in admiration. When she had done so, she was almost frightened by the astonishing likeness of Mrs. Lynn to Laurel Vane.

"It is the dead alive!" she said to herself. "I can no longer believe that St. Leon's wife drowned

herself. There has been some great mistake. She went away and hid herself from all who knew her, and she has reappeared as Mrs. Lynn. I wish I knew the history of those intervening years, and what she intends to do. Will she return to St. Leon? Will he forgive her and take her back?"

She was bitterly chagrined and angry at the thought that Laurel lived in the person of the beautiful, gifted, wealthy Mrs. Lynn. She had been glad when she heard that Laurel was dead. She began to feel now that Fate had played her an unkind trick in resurrecting her hated rival from the grave, where she had deemed her resting all these long years; not that the wily widow had any hope of winning St. Leon. She had understood that long ago. She knew that he was proof against her faded charms, her rouged and powdered beauty, that he thoroughly despised her. She had known it ever since that night at Eden, when he had flung back her offered heart on her hands in supremest scorn and sarcasm. The knowledge had aroused all the littleness and spite of her malicious nature. She had hated St. Leon from that moment—hated the beautiful girl who had won him even more. She would gladly have done both an ill turn if she could, but Laurel, dead in her grave, was secure from her vengeance, and St. Leon, in his proud position and calm reserve, beyond her reach. For several years she had not seen him, but she knew that he had returned from his wanderings and was at home again. The thought that Laurel still lived, the bare possibility that she might yet be reunited to her husband, filled her with jealous anger and dread. On the spur of the moment she penned a letter to one who hated St. Leon and Laurel with as deadly a rancor as her own—one whose love for Laurel had changed to hate, even as had Mrs. Merivale's for St. Leon—no less a person than the villain, Ross Powell.

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Mr. Powell's animosity against the rich man who had won Laurel had not been lessened by the fact that Mr. Le Roy had secured the dismissal of the villain from Mr. Gordon's employ in the week immediately following the *exposé* at Eden. Mr. Le Roy's resentment had followed him steadily from one place to another in New York, until he found that it was useless to expect to retain employment in that city, and was forced to seek a livelihood in a more distant one beyond the reach of his enemy's anger.

The villain was well punished for his unmanly persecution of an innocent, helpless girl, but it did not add to the sweetness of his temper to receive this merited retribution for his wickedness. He swore revenge upon St. Leon Le Roy, and patiently bided his time, pledging himself the faithful ally of Mrs. Merivale in her hatred of her whilom friend and lover.

The time for his revenge seemed come at last, when he received Mrs. Merivale's letter, urging him to come to the seaside, and help her to identify Laurel Vane in the beautiful, courted woman queening it so royally in circles where Maud Merivale could barely find a footing. He lost no time in obeying her mandate, feeling as anxious as the wicked widow herself to prevent a reunion of the long-separated husband and wife.

He reached the hotel on a lovely evening in the last of August, and was shown at once to Mrs. Merivale's private parlor. They had never met but once before, but there was no embarrassment in the meeting. Both were alike at heart—crafty, evil, unscrupulous—ready to do their best to dash down the possible cup of happiness from the lips of the man and woman they hated with all the venom of their little souls.

"And you are sure that she is Laurel Vane?" he said, in wonder.

"I am sure—quite sure in my own mind," she replied. "But you will see her very probably this evening at the usual hop if she deigns to honor it with her presence. It is not often she appears, being very exclusive and reserved, but if you miss her to-night you will be very sure to see her on the shore in the morning."

"What are we to do if it be really Laurel Vane?" asked Powell, musingly.

Her pale eyes flashed with subtle meaning.

"We must do anything to prevent her from meeting Mr. Le Roy again—I could not endure their happiness," she replied, bitterly.

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## CHAPTER LXI.

Contrary to her usual habit, and to humor a caprice of Mrs. Wentworth's, Laurel decided to make her appearance in the hotel parlors that evening. Beatrix and her child were going back to New York with Mr. Gordon the next day. He had promised his daughter to take her home to her mother—promised her Mrs. Gordon's free and full forgiveness both for herself and her beloved Cyril. Beatrix was very happy in the reconciliation with her father—so happy that Laurel could not bear to cloud the brightness of her sky with a single shadow, so she did not refuse when Beatrix asked her to go into the parlors with her that evening.

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"Papa wishes it," said Mrs. Wentworth, "and Cyril is coming, too. He has read your books, and he is very anxious to see you. He can scarcely credit my written statement that you are so young still, in spite of your brilliant literary fame. He imagines you an old lady in cap and spectacles."

Laurel laughed and promised to be introduced to Mr. Wentworth. She had a vivid remembrance of the fair, handsome young fellow who had been so kind and pitiful to her that day in London, when Beatrix and Clarice had so scolded and frightened her. She felt grateful to him still, and was not averse to seeing him again, herself unknown.

She chose an evening dress of pale-pink brocade, with cream-white Spanish lace. The rainbow fire of opals shone on her arms and neck, and her beautiful burnished golden hair was arranged on the top of her head in a queenly fashion. Though she had scarcely given a thought to her personal appearance, she had never looked more lovely. There was not a single woman at the seaside that night who could at all compare with Mrs. Lynn for grace and beauty.

Some one else besides Ross Powell had arrived that evening—no less a person than St. Leon Le Roy.

He was rather puzzled to know why Mr. Gordon had sent him that mysterious summons; but when they met, and he frankly inquired the reason, he received an evasive reply. Mr. Gordon promised to tell him after awhile, but just now he had promised to escort his daughter, Mrs. Wentworth, into the ball-room, where the lively strains of the band were already in progress.

Would Mr. Le Roy see Beatrix and forgive her for her share in his past trouble? She was so sorry, so ashamed. She had never dreamed how it would all turn out.

The publisher was a little nervous as he thus pleaded for his daughter. She had told her father the story of her unanswered letter to Mr. Le Roy. He could not tell whether time had softened his resentment at the girl's conspiracy that had ended so disastrously.

Mr. Le Roy grew very pale for a moment as he was thus brought face to face with the past. Then he remembered Mrs. Wentworth's letter with something like shame. It had been so kind, and sweet, and womanly—so truly repentant.

"I was rude and churlish to slight it so," he said to himself, remorsefully.

"I shall be very glad to see her, and I hope she will forgive me for my churlishness," he said.

Mr. Gordon conducted him to his daughter's private parlor. Beatrix was there, looking very lovely in a simple evening-dress of black and white. Tears crowded thickly to her azure eyes as she confessed her fault and begged him to pardon her.

"If I had known that you were at Eden, Mr. Le Roy, I should never have sent poor little Laurel there," said Beatrix. "I was a young and silly girl enough, I own, but I should have been too wise to have sent that lovely, ignorant child into the way of temptation."

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"That lovely, ignorant child!"—somehow those words seemed like a tacit reproach to him. Yes, that was what she had been—a beautiful, simple child, all unversed in the world's ways, ignorant of the enormity of her fault, or believing that her great love condoned it. How hardly, how cruelly he had judged her, the girl-wife he had taken before God, "for better, for worse."

"I have not kept my vow," he said to himself, and Beatrix, who thought him hard and stern, wondered at the softness of his voice as he replied:

"I forgive you freely, Mrs. Wentworth, and, indeed, I sometimes wonder if there is anything to forgive. My wife made me very happy. I erred when in my hardness I refused to forgive her. But for my hard, suspicious nature that made me impute mercenary motives to her, I should have pardoned the child's fault. But I was cruelly hard. It is no wonder she refuses to forgive me."

"Refuses!" Beatrix echoed, with a start of wonder, as she gazed into his pale, agitated face.

"I spoke in the present tense, as if Laurel really existed. A mere slip of the tongue, Mrs. Wentworth," he said, with assumed carelessness.

"Ah! if only he knew the real truth! But I can see that he is deeply repentant, and I foresee a joyful reconciliation between him and his beautiful gifted wife," said Beatrix to herself, hopefully.

In a little while Cyril Wentworth came in. It was but a distant greeting the two gentlemen gave each other. Cyril thought that Mr. Le Roy had treated his erring bride hardly and unjustly, and he could not be cordial to him, for pretty Laurel's sake—and on the other hand St. Leon remembered how jealous he had been of this handsome young man in the days before he learned the truth about his wife. The old dislike and resentment lingered with him unconsciously still. He took leave very soon after Cyril's entrance, promising to meet them later in the ball-room or the parlors.

"Now, I am going to introduce you to Mrs. Lynn," said Beatrix to her husband. "You will escort her to the ball-room, and papa will take me."

She led him to Laurel's apartment, and watched him closely as he bowed before the gifted authoress whose writings he admired so much. Cyril was almost dumb with surprise and admiration. It was some time before he recovered himself sufficiently to offer her his arm to conduct her to the ball-room.

"Well, Cyril, what do you think of her?" Beatrix asked him eagerly, as soon as she found a chance to hang upon his arm apart from the rest.

He looked fondly down into the fair face.

"You must not be jealous of my opinion, my darling," he said. "Of course you are the sweetest, fairest woman on earth to me. But Mrs. Lynn is the most beautiful as well as the most gifted one I ever met."

It was eloquent praise, but somehow Beatrix looked disappointed. He read it plainly on the fair mobile face.

"Is there anything more that I ought to say about your favorite?" he inquired, laughingly.

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"Have you, indeed, no more to say about her?" she returned wistfully.

"Yes, there is something else—only I am afraid you will laugh at the fancy, dear," said Cyril Wentworth, with a masculine dread of ridicule.

"No, I will not laugh at you. Tell me," said Beatrix, anxiously.

"I am not at all sure you will not laugh," he said, "but I will tell you the truth. Although I have never seen any one quite so lovely as your Mrs. Lynn, yet she recalls to my mind some one else whom I have met—indeed Beatrix, the resemblance is simply marvelous," he exclaimed, glancing across to where the lovely authoress stood conversing with Mr. Gordon.

"Whom does she resemble?" Beatrix inquired with her heart on her lips.

"I am sure you will see the likeness as soon as I mention it," he said. "Look closely at Mrs. Lynn, Beatrix—at her rare type of beauty, her dark eyes, her golden hair, her blonde coloring, her delicately chiseled features, her sweet, sad lips. She is like one long dead. She is like Laurel Vane."

A sigh of relief came from her lips.

"I was sure you could not fail to see the resemblance," she said.

"So you had already noted it?" he said.

"Could one help it?" she whispered. "I will tell you a secret, Cyril. I believe that this is Laurel Vane herself."

"But she is dead," Cyril objected, dazed by the suddenness of his wife's revelation.

"I do not believe it. There has been some dreadful mistake. I believe that St. Leon Le Roy's wife lives in the person of Mrs. Lynn," exclaimed Beatrix, whispering to him earnestly for a few minutes.

Laurel and Mr. Gordon, together with Mr. Ford, stood a little apart watching the gay crowd of waltzers whirling down the center of the long room to the measured beat of the gay dance music. She did not know why she turned her head and looked in another direction, but it must have been in magnetic obedience to an evil spell, for in a moment she met the glance of Maud Merivale—Maud standing near and leaning on the arm of a man who regarded her with bold and eager eyes.

To have saved her life, Laurel could not have repressed that agitated start, that tremor that shook her from head to foot at sight of her old enemy's face! She had been proof against the softness of love, the allurements of friendship, but in that instant the deadly influence of fear and detestation sent a shudder through her frame and blanched her lovely face to the pallor of death. It seemed as though she was possessed by some horrible nightmare dream, as she met those bold, evil eyes, and realized he recognized her as Laurel Vane whom he had so relentlessly pursued with his evil designs.

With a terrible effort she turned her eyes from the villain's exultant face, and they rested by chance on Beatrix, where she stood leaning on her husband's arm. But whose was that other form beside Beatrix—that tall and stately presence? She gave a great gasp of blended emotion—St. Leon Le Roy!

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## CHAPTER LXII.

St. Leon Le Roy—what had brought him here at this moment of all others? What strange trick did fate mean to play her in thus surrounding her all in a moment, as it were, with these people who had had so malign an influence upon her past? Her heart beat with deadly fear. One white, ringed hand furtively sought her uncle's arm and clung to it as if to save herself from falling to the floor. Through the wild rhythm of the dance music, through the measured echo of the flying feet of the waltzers, she instinctively felt him pausing before her—she heard Mrs. Wentworth's voice, saying, with a strange, sweet ring in it:

"Mr. Le Roy, this is my dear friend, Mrs. Lynn."

Laurel could not speak for a moment. A deadly fear possessed her. She heard a clear, calm, self-possessed voice saying, kindly:

"Mrs. Lynn and I have met before. We are neighbors at our homes on the Hudson."

She did not look up, but she saw his strong, shapely white hand held out to her, and as she laid her own within it, his gentle pressure seemed to say dumbly:

"Do not be afraid, dear. They shall not surprise me into betraying your strange secret."

Laurel could not speak for a moment. Happily, Beatrix broke the silence by exclaiming, in a voice from which she could not keep the ring of disappointment.

"Neighbors and acquaintances! And I did not dream that you had met before!"

The whole fabric of the pretty romance she had been building up was destroyed in a moment, like "the baseless fabric of a dream." She felt like bursting into tears of disappointment. What beautiful hopes she had built upon Mrs. Lynn's resemblance to Laurel Vane! And oh, if Mr. Le Roy and the novelist could guess how she and her father had plotted to bring them together, how

angry they would be. While these vexatious thoughts rushed over her, she heard Mrs. Lynn saying in a cool, calm, almost indifferent voice:

"Yes, Mrs. Wentworth, my uncle's home on the Hudson adjoins Eden. While we sojourned there this summer we had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Le Roy and his mother."

And in the next breath Mr. Le Roy said, suavely:

"Will you give me this waltz, Mrs. Lynn?"

She laid her gloved hand on his arm, and they were whirled away to the rhythm of the delicious waltz music. Who could tell how quickly Laurel's heart beat as she "felt her true love's arm round her once again"?

Beatrix, with her father and husband, stood gazing a little blankly at the graceful forms of the handsome, well-matched pair. All three were bitterly disappointed at the prosaic ending of the pretty romance they had built up, and of which they had confidently expected to behold the delightful *dénouement*.

But the most amazed of all were Mrs. Merivale, and her coadjutor in malice, Ross Powell. They had stood near enough to witness the meeting between Mr. Le Roy and Mrs. Lynn, and, while filled with rage at the sight, they had been utterly confounded at the result.

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Mr. Le Roy's cool declaration, "We have met before," Mrs. Lynn's apparent calmness and *insouciance*, astounded them. They looked into each other's eyes in wonder and amaze, and Ross Powell asked, hoarsely:

"What does it mean?"

"What, indeed?" she echoed. "Is the man blind, or are they acting a part?"

He seized upon the idea quickly.

"They *are* acting a part," he said. "I could swear that Mrs. Lynn is Laurel Vane, and, of course, her own husband could not be deceived in her identity. Decidedly they are playing a part. But why? Have you any idea?"

"I cannot imagine," she replied. "And yet I would have the world to know. Is he still angry with her? Is it possible he can recognize her and not choose to claim her?"

"Is it possible that he is mad?" he asked, contemptuously. "No; there is something deeper than that behind their masquerading. Why, she is simply peerless! What man in his senses could behold her and not claim her, knowing her his?"

The yearning in his voice made her bitterly angry. How she hated that beauty that made men mad for her sake!—that satin-smooth skin, those great, wine-dark eyes, that golden hair, that fire and soul that made Mrs. Lynn so peerless, doubly crowned, doubly laureled by both beauty and intellect!

"I thought you hated her!" she said, scornfully.

"So I do. I hate her and I love her in the same breath. Can you understand the feeling?" he asked, hoarsely, and almost under his breath.

"Yes, I understand," she answered, with subdued bitterness.

"The first sight of her lovely face stirred all the old passion within me, and yet I hate her, too," he said, darkly. "I cannot bear that that purse-proud aristocrat should win her back. I could sooner bear to strike her dead at his feet than to see them happy together!"

He stood glowering at the graceful figure as it whirled down the long ball-room in the clasp of St. Leon Le Roy's arm. All the worst passions of his nature were roused by the sight. The first sight of Laurel in all her womanly beauty had kindled anew the fires of his passion for her, while his resentment at her scorn burned to fever heat. He had spoken the truth when he said that he hated and loved her in the same breath.

Mrs. Merivale gazed at him with quickened breath and evilly flashing eyes. She had set herself the deliberate task of arousing all the worst instincts of this wicked and undisciplined nature. Through Ross Powell she would have her revenge on those two whom she hated. He was the blind instrument in her hands to work out her wicked will.

"I do not blame you, Mr. Powell," she said, in a tone of gentlest sympathy. "I know that men feel deeply and strongly on such subjects, and I can imagine what it must be to see the woman one loves beloved by another man and loving him in return. It must almost drive one to madness. It must be the refinement of torture."

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"It is hell!" he muttered back, hoarsely, and with concentrated bitterness and despair.

"It would be easier to see her dead, I fancy," pursued the wily tempter, softly. "Death is a grim bridegroom, but better the gloom of the grave than a hated bridegroom's arms!"

"You are right," he muttered; "I hate them both, and I swear they shall not be happy together! What think you, Mrs. Merivale—is there any chance of a reconciliation?"

"Look!" she answered.

Mr. Le Roy and Laurel had slipped out of the circle of dancers and were leaving the ball-room arm in arm. Mrs. Merivale laughed a hateful, significant laugh.

"They are going out on the shore," she said. "We all know the romantic, softening influences of

moonlight, music and love. They will no longer be able to keep up the farce as strangers. They will be melted by the soft influences of the night and fall into each other's arms. Finis! reconciliation, renewed vows of love, beatific happiness!"

Half maddened by her words, he ground his teeth over a fierce and bitter oath, and shaking her hand from his arm, strode out of the room with "the fires of hell" in his heart.

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## CHAPTER LXIII.

Mr. Le Roy and Laurel had indeed gone out upon the shore. He had invited her to do so, and she had complied, for she was full of half-angry wonder as to what had brought him there. She was frightened too, when she found herself surrounded by all those people who belonged to her past. She asked herself if it could have happened by simple chance. She was frightened. She felt like some hunted creature brought to bay.

She tried to shake off her feelings of mingled terror and annoyance, bravely assuring herself that there existed no cause for them.

"I have done nothing—these people have naught to do with me. I am foolish to feel afraid when I see them all around me," she repeated to herself.

When she tried to analyze her feelings, she found that it was only Ross Powell who inspired her with such terror. She was not afraid of Mrs. Merivale. She simply despised her; and, secure in her fancied *incognito*, she did not feel apprehensive concerning the desire of the jealous woman to work her ill. It was only Powell of whom she felt afraid. His evil, exultant glance had assured her that he knew her, and she had already had evidence of his willingness to destroy every hope of her life so far as lay in his power. It was wholly through dread of his haunting glance that she accepted Mr. Le Roy's invitation to leave the crowded ball-room and go out upon the shore; and once away from the baleful presence of the enemy she feared and dreaded, she dismissed him wholly from her thoughts, and gave herself up to the secret, trembling joy of St. Leon's presence. Her heart was a traitor to her will. It exulted in his nearness despite her reason, that told her they were better apart if she meant to carry out her vow of pride and scorn.

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She leaned upon his arm, and they walked silently through the lovely moonlight down to the wave-washed shore. Laurel's heart beat quick and fast against her husband's arm. The beauty of the moonlight and the sea, the mellow notes of the dance-music, all had their own effect upon her. Mrs. Merivale had rightly estimated each as a softening influence. It was such a night as Emma Alice Browne describes in her sweet poem, "The Bal-Masque."

"Before us, bathed in pearly light,  
A reach of ocean heaved and rolled,  
Girt with the purple zone of night,  
And clasped with one pale glint of gold.

"Behind us, in the gay saloon,  
The flutes wailed out their sweet despair;  
The passionate viols sobbed in tune,  
The horns exulted, and the air  
Pulsed with the low, mellifluous beat  
Of dimpling waves and dancing feet."

St. Leon looked down into the beautiful face that was so maddeningly fair in the soft light, and his heart swelled with a great despair. To think that she had once been his, that that peerless form had rested in his arms, that sweet face slept upon his breast! And now—divided by a woman's pride, they were as widely severed as if Jean Ingelow's "vast, calm river, so dread to see," rolled its rushing waves between their hearts.

Standing thus, arm in arm, each heart busy with its deep emotions, neither heard the furtive steps creeping slowly up behind them, neither saw the cruel, jealous face with its wild eyes glaring upon them, neither saw the gleam of the slender dagger clutched in the murderous hand, neither dreamed of the man who lurked behind them, nor of the woman who followed at a safe distance, eager to sate her vengeance in the sight of her rival's heart's blood.

"Mrs. Lynn, you are angry with me because I am here," said St. Leon, half-questioningly.

"No," she answered, without removing her eyes from the moon-gilded waves that broke at her feet in snowy surf. She felt too weak to meet the mute pleading of those eyes she loved so madly.

"You think that I have followed you here," he went on, sadly. "But you are wrong. Much as I might have wished to do so, dear as your presence is to me, I could never—"

The deprecating words were never finished. A terrible form flashed suddenly before them, a terrible face gleamed in the light dagger flashed upward in the air, and a voice, hoarse with misery and madness, rang out fiercely:

"Die, Laurel Vane—die!"

The dagger glittered against her snowy breast, the hand of the frenzied madman would have driven it swiftly home but all in an instant she was caught away, and the descending blade was

sheathed in another breast—the broad breast of St. Leon Le Roy. The arms that had closed wildly around Laurel for a moment fell away from her, and he dropped on the sands at her feet, the hot blood spurting from his heart, and deepening the rosy hem of her satin robe to a horrible crimson, while her agonized cry rent the summer night: "Oh, St. Leon, you have died for me!"

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## CHAPTER LXIV.

"You have died for me!" the stricken wife repeated, and then, overcome with horror, she knelt down beside the dead man, and with her arms about him, and her head upon his breast, she relapsed into unconsciousness almost as deep as death.

Ross Powell stood still a moment, like one frozen with horror. That maddened cry from the lips of the woman he would have slain rang fearfully in his ears, he realized in a moment to what fearful lengths he had been driven by his own jealous passion and the specious temptations of Mrs. Merivale. He had slain his hated rival, but he had brought down retribution on his own head, for Laurel's wild shriek of despair had echoed loudly back to the hotel, and already a score of people were rushing to the scene. Startled, terrified, the murderer made a wild rush forward, still clutching in his hand the bloody dagger, but before he had run a dozen paces he was brought to a stop by the sudden apparition of a white-faced woman who flung herself wildly before him, hissing out, in tones of blended wrath and horror, a terrible malediction upon his head:

"Murderer! you have slain *him*! How dared you, how dared you? May Heaven's curses light upon your head! May you swing from the hangman's rope! May perdition seize your soul!"

She must have been mad, for she flung herself before him, she barred his way, she clung to him with her desperate white arms, heedless of his curses and remonstrances, terribly intent on delivering him up to justice, and so punishing him for the mad mistake he had made in slaying the husband and sparing the wife!

She must have been mad, or she would have known that he would not tamely submit to detention with the feet of the avengers gaining swiftly on his track, and his soul writhing in horror of the hangman's ghastly rope. He tried to thrust her from him, to tear away from the arms that held him in desperate bondage; he shouted hoarsely for her to let him go.

"Devil in woman's shape, it was you that tempted me!" he cried out, with a fierce, blood-curling oath. "Now let me go, or I swear I will kill you as I did him!"

She must have been mad, for she did not heed the threat—she only clung the tighter in spite of his frantic struggles to release himself from the arms that twined around him venomously, like living serpents in the deadly embrace of hate.

"I will never let you go—never!" she hissed out, madly, and in his frantic fear, hearing the steps of his pursuers coming nearer and nearer on his trail, he lifted the cruel dagger, still reeking with Le Roy's life-blood, and plunged it fiercely in her breast as it gleamed bare and white in the beautiful moonlight.

"Ah!" she gasped, and the white arms relaxed their hold, her body wavered and fell limply forward. He thrust it desperately from him, and sprung forward—free!

Free! but at what terrible cost to his soul. The woman whose low, soft whisperings had tempted him to murder, the woman who in her madness would fain have delivered him up to the law's vengeance, lay dead upon the shore, the cold, white moonlight shining down into her ghastly, staring eyes and pallid face. Retribution had overtaken her, and the fate she had plotted for another recoiled upon her own head. The serpent she had loosed to destroy another struck its deadly fangs into her own heart.

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They lifted her up tenderly and pitifully, and bore her back to the hotel. They spoke of her with the gentlest pity and regret as the victim of a cruel murder, for no one ever knew the truth—no one guessed that she was to blame for the tragedy that had ended her life in so disastrous a fashion. The shadow of her sin never rested on her grave, for there was no one to betray her—Ross Powell was never apprehended. His deadly fear lent wings to his feet, and he escaped from his pursuers and made good his flight to a far-off land. He never returned to his native shore, he was never brought to justice. All his punishment came to him through his own coward conscience. The cruel whip-lash of remorse followed him through the world. The double murder he had committed lay like a mountain's weight upon his soul. He had been bad and wicked, but of his own self he would never have committed murder. He had been goaded into its commission by a temporary madness, and in time he repented most sincerely of his sin, and died in the humble hope of forgiveness by a merciful Redeemer.

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## CHAPTER LXV.

And Laurel?

Full of wonder and pity and sympathy, they lifted the golden head from Le Roy's breast, and bore her away. No one dreamed that he had given his life to save hers. No one dreamed that she

belonged to him by the dearest tie possible to mortals: no one knew that her rightful place was by his side, and the sealed lips did not open to claim her right, for they were pale and rigid as if the finger of eternal silence had been laid upon them.

Strangers' hands carried her back to the hotel, and the news of the dreadful tragedy spread far and wide. It excited the greatest wonder. It was so sudden, so strange, so mysterious. No one knew the murderer, and no one guessed the motive for his double crime—no one except, perhaps, Mr. Gordon, and he was wisely silent. He deemed it for the best.

But it created a great sensation. Mr. Le Roy was so well known as a gentleman of birth, culture, and wealth, and Mrs. Merivale as a woman of fashion, that the wonder and excitement were most intense. Popular indignation ran high against Ross Powell. If they had caught him, it is most probable that Judge Lynch would have been his executioner.

The sensation had its element of romance. It was whispered far and near that the beautiful belle, Mrs. Lynn, had fainted with her head upon Mr. Le Roy's breast. They told how her delicate laces had been crimsoned by his life blood, how she had looked like a dead woman when they lifted her up. When it became known, next day, that her excitement had culminated in an attack of brain fever, the interest and sympathy and curiosity ran higher and higher. People agreed that there must have been something between Mr. Le Roy and Mrs. Lynn. They deemed that they had been lovers.

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Mrs. Wentworth did not return to New York the next day. She remained to nurse her ill and unconscious friend. Cyril Wentworth stayed also. Mr. Gordon went back, and brought his wife down to see her daughter. She was very willing to forgive her now. Years had softened her anger and resentment, and when she heard that Cyril Wentworth had proved himself worthy of her beautiful daughter she threw pride to the winds and forgave him, too. They had a very tender reconciliation—the mother and daughter—in the quiet room where Laurel lay ill unto death with brain fever, her beautiful golden hair cut close to her head, and cold, sparkling ice laid against the fevered brain to cool the subtle fire that burned in her veins.

Beatrix told her mother all that she suspected—that Mrs. Lynn was Laurel Le Roy—and Mrs. Gordon quite agreed with her. She had never forgotten the beautiful face of the girl who had deceived St. Leon Le Roy so bitterly. She recalled it again now, and she was sure that her daughter was right. There could not have been two such lovely faces in the world. She did not doubt that this was St. Leon's wife.

She forgave Laurel now for all that she had done. It was easy to forgive her now, when she lay so ill—perhaps dying. She and Beatrix vied with each other in the care of the invalid. They would not trust her wholly to the care of a hired nurse. Her life was too precious. Laurence and Trixy were left to the care of the nurses, and Beatrix gave all her care and thought to the invalid.

"I cannot do too much for her," said gentle Beatrix. "She was like an angel to me."

The day came at last when her patience and fidelity were rewarded. Laurel opened her eyes and looked up with the light of reason shining in her face. The crisis of her terrible delirium was past. She would recover.

She looked at Beatrix, and a faint flush stole into her pale face.

"Have I told all in my delirium?" she asked.

"You have told nothing. All your ravings have been of your books and of your child," Beatrix answered, gently.

A look of anxiety stole into the hollow, dark eyes.

"My little Laurie?" she said, wistfully.

"He is well and happy. He has been well cared for," answered Beatrix. "But I must not bring him to you yet; you are not strong enough. Can you wait?"

"Yes, I can wait," Laurel answered, patiently. Then she laid her thin, white hand on Beatrix's arm. "Can you forgive me?" she said. "I have been hard and proud and wicked. I have willfully deceived you; I am really Laurel Vane."

Beatrix bent and kissed the poor, pale lips that faltered over this humble confession.

"My dear, I have known it all the while," she said, simply.

"And you forgive me for my duplicity?" asked Laurel, in wonder.

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"My dear, if you can forgive me all the sorrow my willful plot brought down upon your head, there is nothing I cannot forgive you," cried impulsive Beatrix.

"You were not to blame," Laurel answered, and the warm color drifted over her face as she went on, sadly: "It was all the fault of my mad love, Beatrix. I blame no one for my folly and sin. If I had gone away from Eden with Clarice Wells, nothing would have happened. I stayed, and brought down fate upon my own head—and his."

"A happy fate, my dear, if only you will be reconciled to him," said Beatrix, gently.

The dark eyes looked up at her, full of the pathos of regret and despair.

"Ah! now I understand all the pathos that lies in those words, *too late*," she said. "I was mad, I think—mad with my wounded love and pride. I denied my identity to him, I refused to listen to his repentance, I was cruelly hard and cold; and now my punishment has come. I repent, but he cannot hear me. My love cannot reach him, for he is dead."

"Dead! ah, no, my dear! Is it possible that you have been thinking so? He lives, he will soon be well and strong again if only you will forgive him."

Then she stopped suddenly, for Laurel's head had fallen back, her eyes were closed. The shock of joy had been too much. Laurel had quietly fainted.

When she came to herself again there was a strange resolute look in the dark eyes. She took Beatrix's hand and held it tightly in both her own as if she needed strength and support.

"He lives," she said, wildly. "Oh, how glad I am! Now I will make atonement to him! He would have given his life to save mine. I will give him more than my life."

"I do not understand you," said Beatrix, wonderingly.

"You shall know soon," said Laurel. "Dear Beatrix, do let me have Laurie a little while. I am sure it will not hurt me. I am stronger than you think!"

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## CHAPTER LXVI.

Beatrix did not know how to refuse the mother's prayer. She knew that Laurel's heart was yearning for the child, and she did not really think that it would do her any injury to see him. She made her promise that she would not excite herself, and then she went after the little lad who was as usual at play with Trixy upon the shore.

She made Laurence promise that he would be very gentle and quiet in his mamma's room, and he very readily agreed to do so. She knew that he was a little gentleman who would keep his word of honor, and so she sent him in and waited outside patiently until that momentous interview was over.

Laurel kept the child almost an hour. No one knew just what she said to him or how much of the past she revealed to him, but the boy came out with a face all glowing with joy and sought little Trixy.

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To her he confided his joyous news:

"I have a real, live papa, Trixy. He is not dead as we thought. He is good and handsome—as handsome as your papa, Trixy, dear, and when mamma gets well she is going to take me to him."

Trixy was delighted at the good fortune that had befallen her boy lover. It formed an inexhaustible theme with them. They discussed it daily and compared notes on their papas in the most earnest fashion. Laurence was very impatient to have his mamma get well. The vague longing that had haunted him all his lifetime would be realized when he went home to that splendid papa whom already he loved in anticipation.

Laurel convalesced very fast. Since she had heard that her husband still lived, there was a great change in her. She was very grave and thoughtful, even amounting to sadness. Beatrix could not understand her. She was fonder than ever of her child; but there seemed to be a sort of passionate sorrow mingled with her love. She would fondle and caress him, and then she would weep bitterly over him.

"Why do you weep over your child?" Beatrix asked her, in wonder.

"I love him so dearly," answered Laurel, evasively.

"I cannot understand why that should be a reason for weeping over him. You ought to be quite happy over such a beautiful boy," said impulsive Beatrix, sighing, as she thought of her own little lad sleeping far away beneath the skies of England.

"I *am* happy over him," said Laurel. "But, oh, Beatrix, you do not quite understand me. Hitherto my little Laurence has belonged only to me. He came to me in a dark and troublous time, when I was alone and friendless in the world. I worked for him, I made money for him, and I filled up the void in my heart with his baby-love. But for him I should have died. I could not have borne my life. And now we shall be parted, I and my little son. I shall give him to his father; but, oh, Beatrix, what shall I do without him?"

"I cannot understand you, indeed, Laurel," said simple Beatrix. "You are going home to your husband, are you not, dear? Surely you will not mind dividing the child's love with him. Think how selfishly you have kept it to yourself all these years, and you will not lose him or be parted from him. You know what the poet says: 'Half is his, and half is thine.' Depend upon it, Laurel, you will be happier in the child's love when his father shares it. It is only natural that you should be."

"You will understand my meaning better in a little while, dear Beatrix," Laurel answered, gently, and then she abruptly changed the subject.

"I have always wanted to ask you about Clarice Wells," she said. "What has become of her?"

Beatrix laughed, sweetly and gayly.

"I am glad you have not forgotten Clarice," she said. "She was a good girl, and she admired you very much. I was sorry to lose her when I left England, but I could not forbid the bans."

"She is married, then?" asked Laurel.

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"Yes, and her marriage was quite romantic. Should you like to hear about it?"

"Very much," Laurel replied.

"You would scarcely believe it of one so devoted to the laws of Caste, and who lectured you so roundly for aspiring above your station, but Clarice is actually the wife of an English baronet," laughed Beatrix, "and it all happened in the most romantic fashion. I always thought that Clarice had a spice of romance in her nature. She betrayed it when she lent herself so readily to the furtherance of our girlish conspiracy."

"Yes," sighed Laurel.

"She met him—her baronet—in the Alps, where we were taking our little summer holidays," continued Beatrix. "He was summering there, too, and 'they met by chance—the usual way,' you know, Laurel. She saved his life—he was rolling down a precipice and she adroitly caught him back—she was always a quick-witted little thing. Well, he was grateful, she was interested, and, next thing, they fell in love. Clarice was very sensible at first. She refused to have anything to say to him, and I applauded her. But, really, Laurel, it was not so bad. He was not, 'to the manner born.' Until a year before he had been plain John Bull, a briefless barrister. He had succeeded to the baronetage by a series of accidental and unexpected deaths of heirs-presumptive, and he was plain and sensible, and forty years old at least."

"I do not think his age was any objection," cried Laurel, hastily, and blushing very much.

"No, indeed, and it did not prove so in this case," smiled Beatrix. "He would not take her No for an answer. He never rested until he made pretty Clarice 'my lady.'"

"It is very romantic. I shall make it a plot for a novel," declared Laurel. "I dare say Clarice would not scold me now for aspiring above my station," she added, with a pretty, pensive smile.

"I dare say not," said Beatrix, greatly amused. "Exceptions alter cases."

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## CHAPTER LXVII.

In five weeks after that tragedy at the seashore Laurel announced her intention of returning to Belle Vue. She had convalesced very rapidly, and the bloom and beauty of health were fast returning to her lovely face. Nothing was left to remind one of her almost fatal illness save the short, soft rings of sunny hair that clustered all over the beautiful, graceful head. Beatrix grieved sorely over the loss of that wealth of golden tresses from her friend's head, but after all it scarcely detracted from Laurel's beauty. The pretty, babyish ringlets lent a *spirituelle* charm to the fair face and made a halo about the brow that made her "half of earth and half divine."

"Let us go home to Belle Vue," she said, pleadingly, to her uncle and he eager to gratify her slightest wish, consented. They wished to have Beatrix and her mother go with them, but they excused themselves and promised to come later on.

"When Laurel has left you and you feel lonely," said Mrs. Gordon, with a smile.

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The beautiful authoress blushed vividly and then grew very pale. She made no answer to the half question. No one quite knew what she intended to do. No one could understand her, she was so shy, so reticent, she blushed so at the slightest mention of Mr. Le Roy's name.

But Beatrix, as she held her in her arms at parting, whispered, pleadingly, against her cheek:

"You will not be hard and unforgiving any longer, dear. You will go home to him?"

"You shall hear from me in a few days," Laurel answered; and Beatrix was obliged to be content with that ambiguous reply.

They went back to Belle Vue. The autumn days had set in now, and the trees were clothed in all the glory of their autumn coloring. From hill to hill, from shore to shore glowed with scarlet and brown and gold. The sun shone still with all the brightness of summer, the flowers were in their glory yet. There was no cloud in all the summer sky that morning when Laurel went shyly up to her uncle's side.

"Uncle Carlyle, I want you to take me over to Eden this morning," she said, with the beautiful blushes mantling on her cheeks.

He drew the back of his hand hastily across his eyes. The hour for which he had longed and dreaded had come. He was going to lose Laurel and his darling little Laurie.

"My dear, are you strong enough?" he asked her, wistfully. "Remember, we only came to Belle Vue yesterday."

"I am so restless—it seems as if I cannot wait," she said, and he saw that the dark eyes were full of unrest and pain.

"We will go at once, dear," he said; and though he did not say another word, Laurel understood why he took her so tenderly in his arms and kissed her. She did not speak. Her heart was too full for words.

They took little Laurence and drove over to Eden. Mr. Ford sent in his card alone to Mrs. Le Roy, and they waited silently in the grand drawing-room for her. But when he heard her coming he

withdrew into the shadow of the curtained bay-window. He did not wish to embarrass her meeting with Laurel by his presence.

The door opened and she entered slowly with a step that had grown unconsciously feeble and halting. The fine old face looked pale and sad, there was a sorrowful droop about the delicate lips. The years that had brought Laurel to the perfection of her womanly beauty had sadly aged St. Leon's mother.

She came in sadly enough, but when she saw who her visitors were the light of a sudden, tremulous hope flashed over her proud, sad face. Her dim eyes brightened.

"Mrs. Lynn!" she exclaimed, wonderingly.

The beautiful woman in the white dress with the crimson roses fastened against her round white throat rose and went hastily forward. There was a look of pain and shame on the fair face.

"Do not call me by that name. It never was mine. It has only been the mask beneath which I hoped to hide my identity," cried Laurel. "I am ashamed and penitent now. Call me, Laurel, mother, and say that you forgive me."

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"Laurel, I am so glad!" cried Mrs. Le Roy, throwing her arms about her neck, and then with the charming inconsistency of woman she wept.

She had forgotten the child in her joy at the restoration of Laurel, but suddenly a little hand stole into hers, and a half-expostulating voice said:

"Grandmamma!"

She turned and caught the beautiful boy to her heart, half-smothering him in her fond caresses.

"My precious little grandchild," she cried; and Laurence asked her *naïvely*:

"If you are glad that we have come home, mamma and me, why do you cry?"

"You must not ask questions, my little lad," said Mr. Ford, coming forward and greeting his hostess, and thinking to himself that she had suddenly grown beautiful in the radiance of the joy-light that beamed upon her face.

He asked the question that Laurel was too timid to syllable upon her lips.

"How is Mr. Le Roy?"

"He has had a relapse—he is quite unwell to-day," Mrs. Le Roy said, tremulously. "He has been very ill since we brought him from the seashore. He makes no effort to recover. He does not seem to care to live."

She looked at Laurel as she spoke.

"It is all your fault, dear!" she said, gently. "Life has never been the same since you were lost to him. Only this morning the physician told me that without some object in life, something more to live for than he has now, my son would never get well."

Laurel's face was very pale. She drew her arm tightly around her son as he stood by her side. "May I—see him?" she asked, in a faint, trembling voice, without lifting her eyes.

"He is in his own room, dear. Go to him as soon as you please," Mrs. Le Roy answered, gladly.

Laurel did not wait for another word. They saw that she was very pale, that she trembled very much, and their hearts went out to her in silent sympathy for her suffering. She rose, took her little son by the hand, and silently left the room.

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## CHAPTER LXVIII.

St. Leon Le Roy lay among the lace-fringed pillows of his luxurious bed that morning alone and lonely.

It was a beautiful room where he lay, but the invalid took no pleasure in it. It was large and lofty, with a lovely painted ceiling, and the walls were hung in beautiful draperies of rose-hued silk and snowy lace. The furniture and carpet were upholstered in pink velvet, the carpet had a pattern of roses upon it, the vases on the marble mantel were filled with exquisite flowers. St. Leon had been surrounded by beautiful things all his life. They did not add to his pleasures nor detract from his pain.

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He lay there wearily among the downy pillows, with his wasted white hand over his heavy eyes, and his thoughts fixed on the beautiful wife, so fatally lost to him. Only that morning the physician had warned him.

"You must rouse yourself, Le Roy, or you will die from the effects of your terrible wound. The strain upon your system has been most severe. I have exhausted my art in bringing you to the point of convalescence. Now, you must help yourself. If you give way to this fit of despondency, this *ennui* that I see creeping upon you, I will not answer for the consequences. You must rally from this spell of dejection. Make yourself an object in life, and live for it."

Then he went away. He had done all he could for the suffering body; he did not know how to minister to a mind diseased. He had detected the symptoms, but St. Leon alone could apply the



remedy.

He lay silently thinking.

There was only one object for which he could have cared to live, and that was unattainable. Why should he exert himself to hold on to a life that was scarce worth living? Why not let go the anchor and drift idly with the tide that dashed him hither and thither on its restless waves? Who would greatly care to live when all of life had grown into a long regret?

His door unclosed softly, but he did not turn his head. He knew that his mother had had visitors, and he supposed that she was now returning. He did not look at her—he knew that she could not bear to see the heavy sadness in his eyes.

A light step stole across the floor, and saying to himself, "She thinks me asleep," he gently closed his eyes. It was a harmless deception he often practiced upon her. Thinking him asleep, she would feel more content.

"Papa!" said a proud, happy little voice, and a soft hand fluttered down upon his own.

He opened his eyes with a start.

A child was standing beside him—a beautiful boy, with hair and eyes like his own, and his mother's wistful smile—Laurence Lynn!

"Laurie!" he cried.

"Yes, papa, I have come home to you. I am your son—really and truly. Are you not glad?" cried the child, who had been so loved and petted all his life that it was no vanity in him to imagine that any one must be proud and glad in possession of him.

Glad! St. Leon could not speak for a moment. He was dazed with the suddenness of the surprise.

He threw his arm about his son, and strained him to his heart; but his thoughts were with the mother more than the child.

"Did you come alone, dear?" he asked, as soon as he could command his voice.

"Oh, no; mamma and Uncle Carlyle came with me. Mamma!"—he suddenly looked around, then broke from St. Leon's clasp and ran to the door—"mamma, come back!" he called. "Why did you run away?"

St. Leon leaned on his elbow and watched the door impatiently, his breath coming and going in great strangling gasps—his heart full of trembling anticipation. [Pg 153]

"What does it mean? Will she forgive me? Will she come back to me?" he asked himself, in a bewildering maze of hope and anxiety.

Laurie opened the door and ran out into the hall. He came back in a moment, and before he entered St. Leon heard the echo of a loved, familiar footstep beside that of the child. The color rushed into his face. His heart beat tumultuously.

"Why did you run away, mamma?" the child was still repeating as they came across the threshold hand in hand.

St. Leon had heard that she had been very ill after the shock of his supposed death that dreadful night. He had drawn some hopeful auguries from the news at first. Perhaps she loved him still, perhaps she would relent and come back to him. But he had waited so long for a sign from her that he had fallen into despair again. The sight of her now, as she came into the room, revived the dying embers of hope within his breast.

To his fond, adoring eyes she had never looked more lovely despite the closely cut curls and the extreme pallor of her face. She came across the floor holding the child by the hand, and as she met the imploring gaze of his eyes her own seemed to swim in a fine glittering mist of unshed tears. She stood there silently a moment, and he waited humbly to hear her speak—to pronounce his doom, as it were, for it seemed to him that fate itself hung on those tender, wistful lips. In that moment of passionate suspense and longing it seemed to him that he experienced something of the feelings that must have thrilled her that terrible night when she had prayed him for forgiveness and he had coldly put her away.

"It is retribution," he said to himself, while the cold dew of agony beaded his brow.

She was holding Laurie's hand tightly clasped within her own. Once, twice, she raised it to her lips, then suddenly she laid it quickly in St. Leon's palm and withdrew her own. Her voice had a strange, almost dying sound as she said:

"You saved my life, St. Leon. Ay, you did more—you would have given your life for mine! Do not think me ungrateful. Do not believe that I could forget what I owe you. I am come to make reparation. You would have given me your life. See! I give you what is dearer than my life to me—the heir to Eden!"

Then she stepped back into the shadow. She did not wish him to see the white agony that was written on her face. She would make the sacrifice bravely, not showing him all that it cost her bleeding heart.

He drew one arm around the child and held him to his breast. He kept the other free. His eyes turned wistfully to that fair, sad face, half veiled by the falling curtain.

"Laurel," he breathed.

There was a world of tenderness, passion, and entreaty in his tone. Her heart beat wildly. She turned toward him, trying to look calm and brave.

He held out his other arm to her, but she would not understand. She gazed at him in silent distress.

"Laurel," he said again, "the gift would not be complete without you. Are you not coming to me, too, dear?" [Pg 154]

The swift color rushed into her face, her great dark eyes brimmed over with tears, but she stood quite still, she would not stir.

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## CHAPTER LXIX.

She did not stir, she did not speak. The tears brimmed over and rolled down her cheeks, but she kept her place in silence.

"Will you not come to me?" he pleaded, and she answered then, drearily:

"I cannot."

"You cannot! Oh, Laurel, do not say so!" he cried. "What is to hinder you from coming back to my heart? What can stand between us?"

"Your own words," she answered, brushing the tears away, and gazing at him with eyes full of somber misery and pain.

He was full of wonder and perplexity.

"I cannot understand you," he said. "I would give the world to have you back again, Laurel. I love you with the most faithful love the world ever knew. I shall never cease to love you!"

"Yet once you said—surely you remember it, St. Leon?—that you could never again love a woman who had deceived you. Once fallen from its pedestal, the broken idol could never be restored again."

The words came back to his memory—the words he had spoken before he *knew*—the words that were all that stood between them now.

He looked at her in anguish. He would have given anything if only he had never made that vain boast—how vain he had never known till now.

"I was foolish and mad and blind," he cried. "It was the most empty boast the world ever knew. Oh, Laurel, will you not forgive me for my hardness and cruelty?"

She stood still, with her small hands folded before her, her fair head drooping low, as she answered:

"I do forgive you."

"Then you will come back to me! You will not be hard upon me, Laurel, I have repented so bitterly. I repented within twenty-four hours after I had put you away from me so hardly. All my life since we parted, has been one long repentance, my darling."

"I did not come back for this, St. Leon," she said, tremulously; "I meant only to give you the child. I thought I should go away then."

Little Laurence uttered a startled cry. He wrenched himself loose from his father's clasp, and ran to her to hide his face in the soft white folds of her dress.

"No, no," he said, vehemently, "I cannot stay with papa unless you will stay, too, mamma. I love you the best!"

St. Leon looked at his wife. She shrunk a little before that look. It was sadly reproachful.

"You see how it is," he said. "You have kept him from me all his life, and now he has no love to give me!"

But the child interposed, vehemently:

"I love you both, and I will stay with you both. Only mamma must not go away from Eden."

He drew her forward impulsively as he spoke. He placed her hand in her husband's, and closed his own little dimpled fingers around them, so that Laurel could not draw hers away.

"Mamma, I love you first and best," he said. "But I love papa and grandmamma, too. If he has been naughty, let us forgive him and stay with him."

"Stay with me, Laurel," echoed St. Leon.

She felt the warm, persuasive clasp of his fingers on hers. All the ice about her heart melted beneath that touch. She could not hold out against him. She knew that she must yield if she did not fly from his presence.

"Oh, let me go!" she cried. "It is not best that I should come back to you. It is the child you want. There is so much in the past that would haunt us! There is so much to rouse reproach and regret. We are best apart. Oh, let me go!"

But somehow he had drawn her down to the clasp of his arms now. His warm lips were pressed against her cheek.

"Only one word, dear," he whispered. "Do you love me still, my Laurel?"

"I have loved you always," she murmured, and she knew that with this confession love had conquered pride.

"Then let us forget all else but our love," he pleaded. "You will stay with me, Laurel?"

"I will stay," she answered.

"And never yet since first in Paradise,  
O'er the four rivers the first roses blew,  
Came purer pleasure unto mortal kind,  
Than lived through her who, in that happy hour,  
Put hand to hand beneath her husband's heart,  
And felt him hers again."

THE END.

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## Transcriber's Notes:

Retained inconsistent hyphenation when no clear majority was found (e.g. "beribboned" vs. "be-ribboned").

Normalized accents in "dénouement."

Normalized some punctuation in series listings at end of book.

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The inconsistency between cover and title page title ("GIRL'S" vs. "GIRLS") has been retained. On the title page, the apostrophe in "GIRLS" was originally an inverted comma.

Page 7, corrected "he said" to "she said" after "now your pa's dead."

Page 11, added missing quote at end of letter signature (near end of chapter III). Changed "background" to "background" in "hovered in the background." Added missing comma in "somber, frightened."

Page 14, normalized "over-skirt" to "overskirt" for consistency.

Page 15, changed "materrially" to "materially" ("house without materially").

Page 17, changed "Leroy" to "Le Roy" before "Isabel Gordon was very careless."

Page 22, added missing close quote and paragraph break before "You do not look sorry."

Page 23, changed "mourning to "morning" in "becoming morning-dress."

Page 28, changed "Where I can find you?" to "Where can I find you?"

Page 29, changed "flowes" to "flowers" in "nothing but these flowers." Changed "truf" to "turf" in "cool, green turf." Added missing "St." in "ever came here except St. Leon Le Roy."

Page 33, removed unnecessary quote after "comprehend him yet."

Page 36, added missing quotes between "would hate me" and "I am sorry."

Page 38, added missing comma after "My sweet little Laurel."

Page 43, changed "swifty" to "swiftly" in "jeweled hands flew swiftly."

Page 47, corrected "had she fathomed" to "had he fathomed."

Page 52, changed "Wenthworth" to "Wentworth" in "you have broken with Wentworth."

Page 59, added close quote after "feel so horribly afraid."

Page 65, changed "ceaseed" to "ceased" in "you had ceased to love."

Page 73, added missing comma after "all they could."  
Page 85, changed "in her beast" to "in her breast."  
Page 86, changed "stifled man" to "stifled moan."  
Page 92, changed "If old St." to "If only St."  
Page 93, changed "fiancée" to "fiancé" for consistency ("runaway *fiancé*").  
Page 102, added missing quote after "Beloved wife of St. Leon Le Roy."  
Page 103, added missing comma after "When he died."  
Page 112, Changed "wtih" to "with" in "bore herself with more."  
Page 118, added missing quote after "the quietest manner possible."  
Page 119, added missing quote after "remained more than a year."  
Page 123, changed "Mr. Lynn" to "Mrs. Lynn" before "if only I had forgiven her."  
Page 126, changed "It" to "I" in "I thought that grave."  
Page 128, changed "disappointd" to "disappointed" before "she acquiesced in his decision."  
Page 136, changed "bus" to "but" in "but there was no embarrassment."  
Page 138, changed "sufficently" to "sufficiently" in "recovered himself sufficiently."  
Page 139, changed "laught" to "laugh" in "laugh at the fancy."  
Page 142, changed "M." to "Mr." in "Mr. Le Roy's invitation."  
Page 149, changed second instance of "CHAPTER XLVII" to "CHAPTER LXVII."  
Page 150, changed "mornin" to "morning" in "Eden this morning."

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